

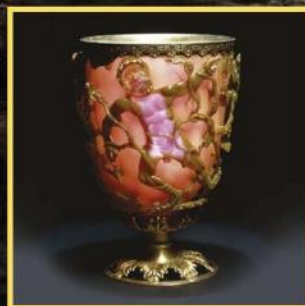
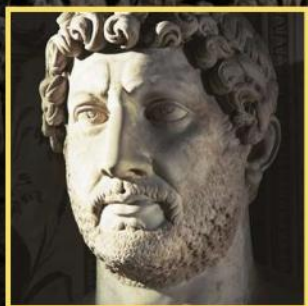
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“What have the Romans ever done for us? We all know, of course, the Monty Python sketch and the catalogue of benefits supposedly endowed by Roman conquerors. Yet the story of four and a half centuries of invasion, occupation and, finally, desertion of Britain by the Romans is a complex and often nebulous one.

This special edition explores the subject in depth. We meet the **hardy peoples who inhabited this island** at the time of Julius Caesar's first foray in 55 BC, and ask whether they really were the **proud, noble rebels** portrayed by Roman writers such as Tacitus. We run our eye over the imperial forces in Britain, including the **first British navy** and the **ill-fated Ninth Legion**, lost in history. And we follow the campaigns waged across the island, notably the **bloody and disastrous expeditions in Scotland**.

Not all was conflict and chaos, of course. We take a **guided tour of Britannia** to experience daily life once the Roman province was well established, and visit the **luxurious villas of the elite**. Finally, we examine how imperial instability forced Rome to **turn its back on the province** and the impact of that departure, as well as the long-term **legacy of the Roman occupation** on Britain's psyche and culture.

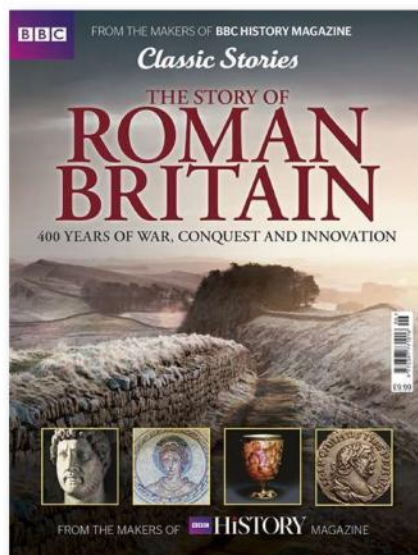
We also explore Britain's **rich surviving Roman heritage**, from the walls of Wroxeter to the sea-fort of Portchester and glorious villa mosaics – not to mention, of course, Hadrian's monumental wall.

The Story of Roman Britain compiles and updates articles that have appeared previously in *BBC History Magazine*, along with new content written specially for this edition. I hope you enjoy it.

Rob Attar

Editor

BSME Editor of the Year 2015, Special Interest Brand



“Britain's Roman past is **intriguingly mercurial, slippery and hard to grasp**. It is **fascinatingly alive**”

Writer **CHARLOTTE HIGGINS** looks at the pitfalls and insights encountered by historians exploring Roman Britain on page 114

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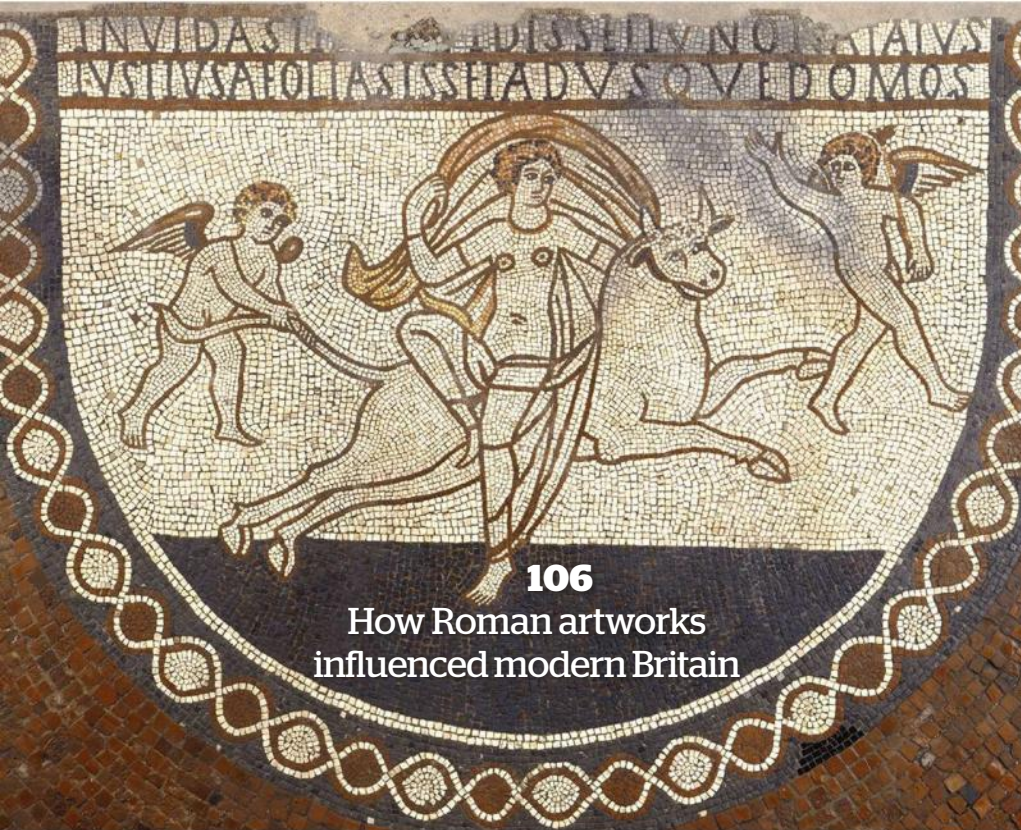
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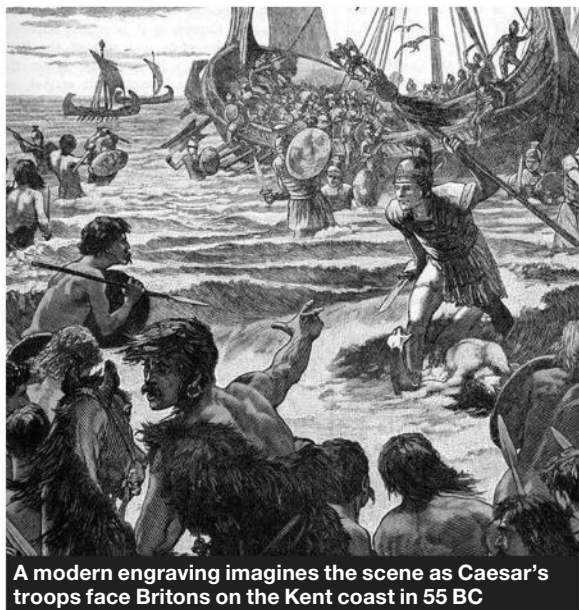
Miles Russell traces the story of Roman Britain, from first invasion attempts to final abandonment by the occupiers



A gold coin of Cunobelinus, warlike king of the Catuvellauni, from around AD 40

55 BC

The Roman general Julius Caesar leads an army across 'the Ocean' (the English Channel) at the edge of the known world and into southern Britain. The expedition, undertaken primarily for propaganda reasons, is an almost total failure. Caesar's army is hemmed in at the beachhead by overwhelming native forces and he is fortunate to escape with his life – but is nevertheless hailed as a hero back in Rome.



A modern engraving imagines the scene as Caesar's troops face Britons on the Kent coast in 55 BC

AD 40-42

A crisis in southern Britain, possibly as a result of the warlike and expansionist tendencies of King Cunobelinus (later transformed by Shakespeare into Cymbeline), results in the exile of his son Adminus to Rome and, later, to the expulsion of British king Verica of the Atrebates in Hampshire. Verica flees to the emperor Claudius, and persuades him to invade Britain in order that Verica might be reinstated.

50 BC

54 BC

Caesar embarks on a second expedition across the Channel, this time determined to achieve a great victory against the Britons. After a series of inconclusive skirmishes, his soldiers capture a British 'town' (probably Wheathampstead in Hertfordshire) and he takes the surrender of King Cassivellaunus – the first Briton whose name we know.

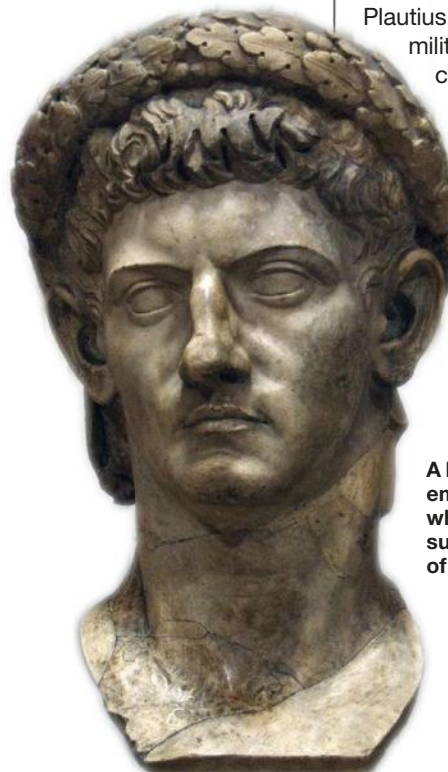


The defensive ditch known as Devil's Dyke east of Wheathampstead, possible site of the town captured by Caesar in 54 BC

AD 1

AD 43

Claudius initiates the full conquest of southern Britain under the command of senator Aulus Plautius. Claudius needs a swift military victory in order to cement his position as emperor, and Britain seems the obvious target. He knows that if he succeeds he will be acclaimed as a war leader greater than Julius Caesar, who has now been officially decreed a god.



A bust of the Roman emperor Claudius, who ordered the successful invasion of Britain in AD 43



A 19th-century engraving shows the rebel British leader Caratacus presented to emperor Claudius in Rome after his capture and exile

AD 51

Caratacus, defiant leader of the British resistance to Rome, is finally captured after eight years on the run, during which time he conducted a guerrilla campaign against the occupiers with the assistance of the Silures and Ordovices tribes of Wales. With his capture, and later display in Rome as a prisoner, Claudius believes that the conquest of Britain is complete.

AD 60



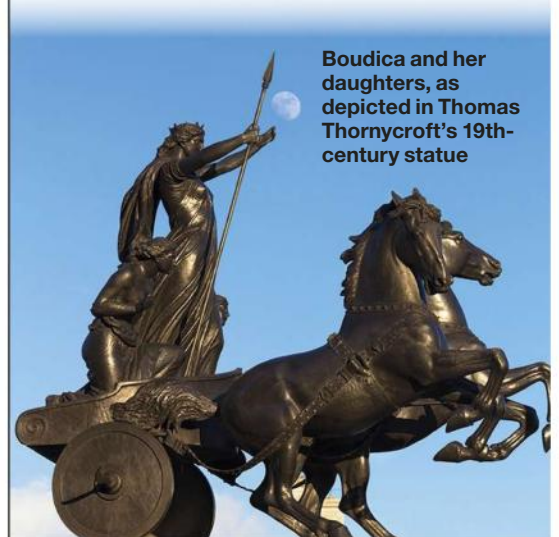
Roman stone anchors found in the Menai Strait, possibly used in the Roman assault on Anglesey led by Suetonius Paulinus

AD 58-60

Roman campaigning in north Wales, led by general Suetonius Paulinus, defeats the Ordovices of Snowdonia. Roman troops then cross the Menai Strait and take direct control of Anglesey, a major religious centre and refuge for insurgents.

AD 60-61

The Iceni of Norfolk, a tribe previously allied to Rome, rise up in a war of independence against Rome. Led by their queen Boudica, the Iceni join forces with the Trinovantes of Essex to destroy the fledgling Roman cities of Colchester, London and St Albans. Boudica and her followers are finally defeated in a pitched battle. More than 200,000 people are recorded as dying in the revolt and its immediate aftermath.



Boudica and her daughters, as depicted in Thomas Thornycroft's 19th-century statue

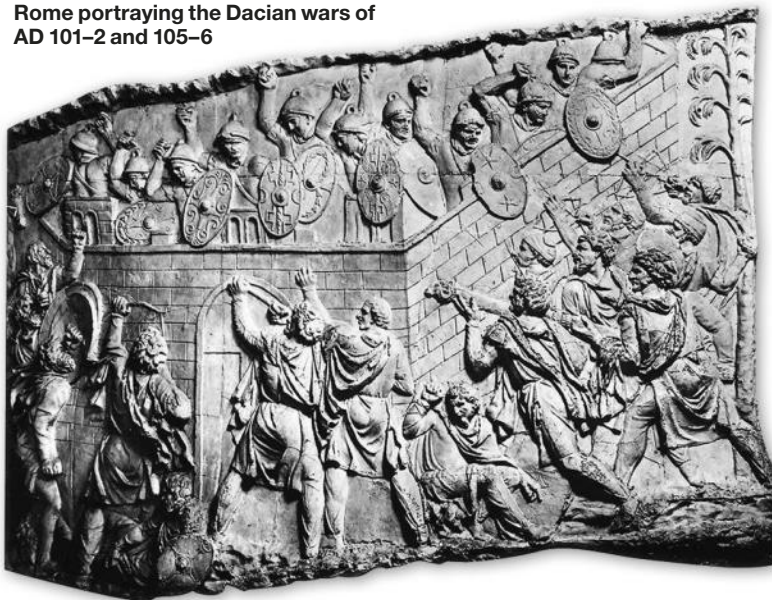
AD 69-71

Pro-Roman queen Cartimandua of the Brigantes in northern England is ousted in a palace coup led by her anti-Roman husband, Venutius. Cartimandua flees to the safety of Rome, and the legions march north to quell the insurgency. By AD 71 the Brigantes are conquered.

A carved stone head believed to depict Brigantia, goddess of the Brigantes tribe of northern England. It was unearthed in 2014 at a Roman fort in South Shields



Soldiers from Dacia (bounded in the south by the Danube, in what is now Romania) attack a Roman blockhouse in a scene from Trajan's Column in Rome portraying the Dacian wars of AD 101-2 and 105-6



AD 105

Problems along the Danube frontier of the Roman empire necessitate the withdrawal of troops from the southern lowlands of Scotland. The majority of Roman forts to the north of a line between Newcastle and Carlisle are now abandoned.

AD 100

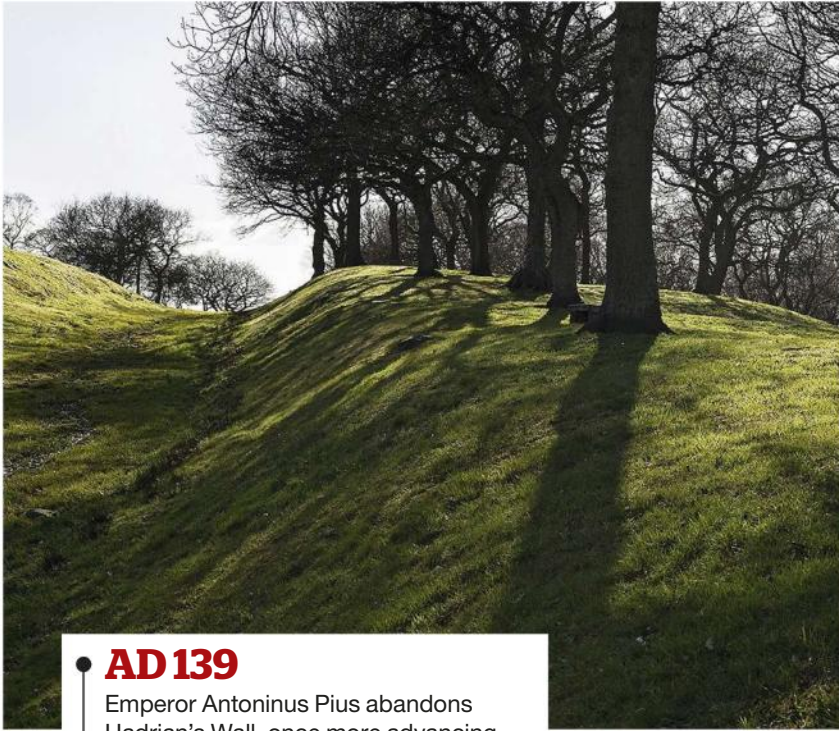
AD 120

AD 84

The Roman army of governor Agricola defeats the Caledonian tribes led by Calgacus at the battle of Mons Graupius in Scotland (depicted below in a modern illustration). Roman victory signals the conclusion of the long campaign of conquest that began in AD 43. Following this battle, the Roman fleet circumnavigates Britain, proving that it is indeed an island.



MIRRORPIX/TOPFOTO/AGF IMAGES



AD 139

Emperor Antoninus Pius abandons Hadrian's Wall, once more advancing soldiers into southern Scotland in the hope that a short war and swift victory will win him much-needed support in Rome. Creating a defensive line between what is now Glasgow and Edinburgh, the emperor commissions a new earth-and-timber frontier: the Antonine Wall. By AD 163, though, his barrier is abandoned and Hadrian's Wall is recommissioned.

Remains of the Antonine Wall at Bonnybridge, near Falkirk. Built in AD 139 across Scotland north of Hadrian's wall, it was the northern edge of the Roman empire



Septimius Severus's wife Julia Domna and sons Geta and Caracalla, shown on a coin of c210 AD

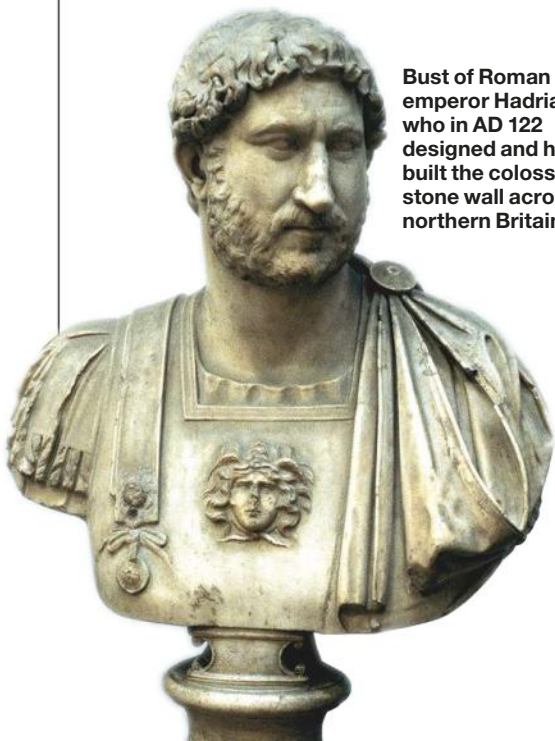
AD 208-11

The emperor Septimius Severus, his wife Julia Domna and sons Geta and Antoninus (known to history as Caracalla) arrive in Britain in AD 208, setting up court at York. Keen to defeat the tribes of Scotland, Severus begins campaigning north of Hadrian's Wall. The war quickly unravels and in 211, following much loss of life, Severus dies – reportedly 'worn out' – in York and his sons return to Rome.

AD 150

AD 122

Emperor Hadrian visits Britain following a series of major military setbacks, including the probable destruction of the Ninth Legion and the burning of London. He sets about securing the northern limit of his empire by creating a monumentally impressive stone wall.



Bust of Roman emperor Hadrian, who in AD 122 designed and had built the colossal stone wall across northern Britain

AD 200

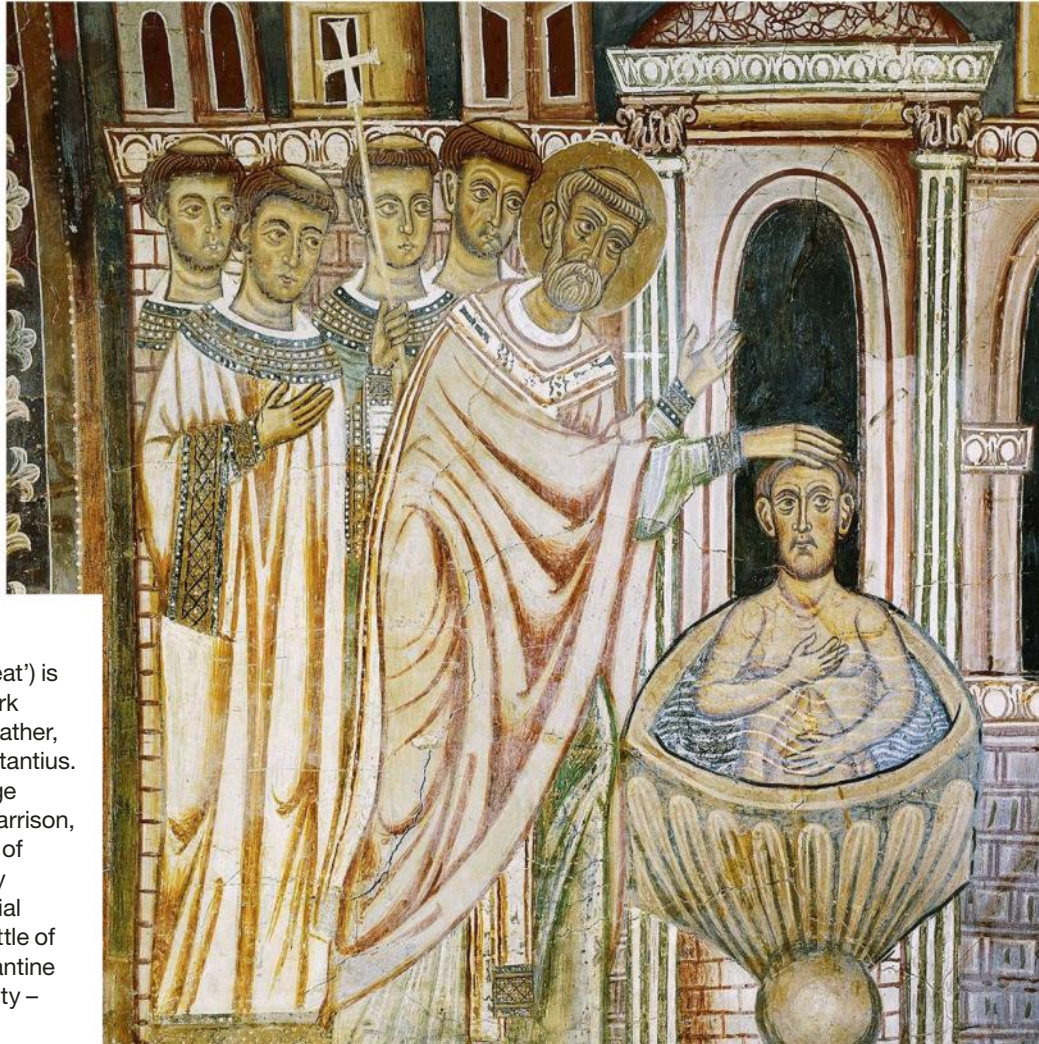


Despite its fortifications Hadrian's Wall, shown in a 20th-century illustration, was breached by anti-Roman tribes in AD 180

AD 180

Hadrian's Wall is overrun by a massive confederation of anti-Roman tribes, which cause widespread devastation to a significant part of northern England. A Roman victory is only achieved four years later after much fighting.

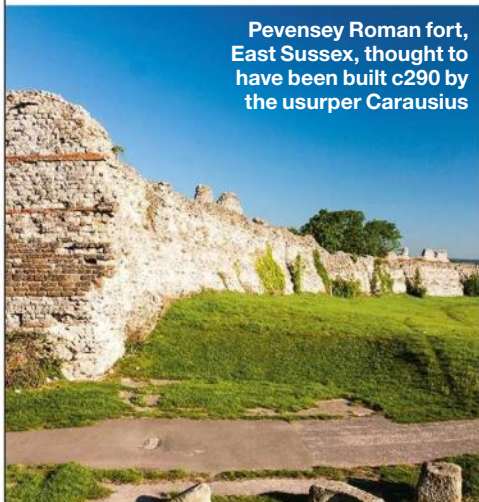
Emperor Constantine I is baptised after his conversion to Christianity, as portrayed in a 13th-century fresco in Rome. He launched his bid for imperial power from his base in Britain



AD 306

Constantine (later 'the Great') is proclaimed emperor in York following the death of his father, the Roman emperor Constantius. Marching south with a large contingent of the British garrison, Constantine takes control of Gaul (France) before finally seizing the Western imperial throne in AD 312 at the battle of the Milvian Bridge. Constantine later converts to Christianity – the first emperor to do so.

AD 300



Pevensey Roman fort, East Sussex, thought to have been built c290 by the usurper Carausius

AD 286-96

Britain cedes from Rome, establishing itself at the heart of a breakaway empire controlled by rogue general Carausius, with its own army and minting its own coins. Initially unable to defeat this rebel, Rome loses control of Britain for a decade. After a renewed invasion, however, in AD 296 Carausius's successor Allectus is defeated and Britain restored to the Roman empire.

AD 367

Britain is overwhelmed by Picts (from what is now Scotland), Scots (from Ireland) and Saxons (from Germany and southern Scandinavia) during the so-called 'Great Barbarian Conspiracy'. The military and civilian infrastructure of the province never fully recovers.

An 18th-century illustration of Picts ('painted people') of Scotland, one of the groups who launched attacks on Roman Britain in AD 367





A gold *solidus* coin of emperor Constantine III, minted in southern France during his reign



AD 407-09

Constantine III, an officer in the British garrison, is proclaimed emperor by his troops and crosses to Gaul. In his absence, the authorities in Britain reject both Constantine and the legitimate government of the Western Roman emperor Honorius, instead establishing their own independent system of government.

AD 400



A coin of Magnus Maximus, a Roman general in Britain who battled his way to the throne of the Western Roman empire

AD 383

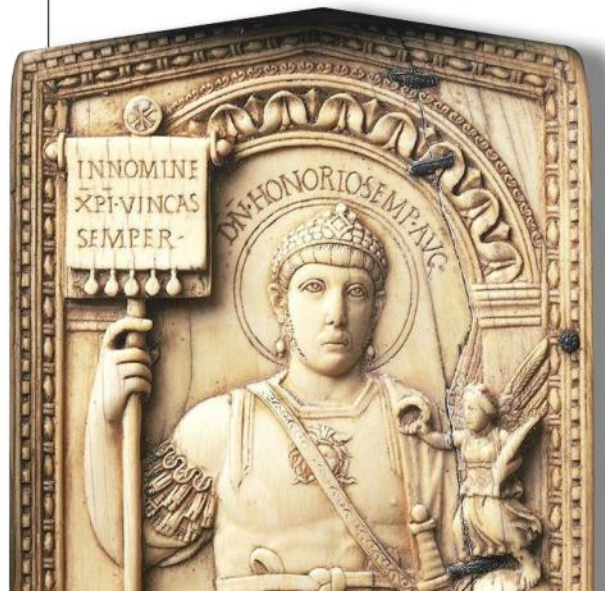
Magnus Maximus, a general in Britain, is proclaimed emperor by his troops. Removing large numbers of the provincial garrison, Maximus crosses the Channel to fight and claim the western imperial throne. Though he succeeds in taking control of Gaul, Germany and Spain, he is killed by forces of the Eastern Roman emperor. The British garrison will never be reinforced.

AD 410

The beleaguered, ineffective and paranoid emperor Honorius tells the cities of Britain to look to their own defence. Without any hope of aid or military reinforcement, Britain is no longer formally part of the Roman empire. **H**

Miles Russell is senior lecturer in prehistoric and Roman archaeology at Bournemouth University

Emperor Honorius, portrayed on a diptych around the time he acknowledged that Roman rule in Britain was at an end



INVAS

BRITAIN BEFORE THE ROMANS

Meet the peoples of pre-Roman Britain

10 BIG QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CONQUEST

Debunking myths about British resistance

ROMANS UNDER ATTACK

How Roman chroniclers portrayed rebel Britons

WHEN BRITANNICA RULED THE WAVES

Review the fleet of Rome's British navy

ION

GETTY IMAGES



Dun Carloway broch on the Isle of Lewis, one of the best preserved of the many fortified strongholds built in north and west Britain during the late Iron Age

BRITAIN BEFORE THE ROMANS

The island invaded by Claudius in AD 43 was a diverse realm with varied peoples and industries, influenced by trade with the Mediterranean. **Barry Cunliffe** explores Iron Age Britain



S ometime around 320 BC, the Greek explorer Pytheas set off from his home town of Massalia (now called Marseilles) on an expedition to the mysterious northern limits of the continent. Because he was particularly interested in the source of tin, it was logical for him to follow the ancient tin route across south-west Gaul via the river Garonne to the Atlantic, and then to take ship on local boats for his onward venture into the unknown.

His remarkable journey took him around Britain; it is possible that he also visited Iceland (called Thule in Latin) and the amber-producing coast of Denmark before returning home, where he wrote a book about his adventures, *On the Ocean*. The book no longer survives but it was quoted by other writers such as Strabo, Pliny and Diodorus, whose works we do still have. It was Pytheas who first recorded the name of the inhabitants of our island – Pretani, the ‘painted ones’ – from which, of course, the name Britain derives.

Pytheas probably made his first British landfall in Cornwall, where he met the local tin workers. “The inhabitants of Britain who live on the promontory called Belerion are especially friendly to strangers,” he was quoted as saying, “and have adopted a civilised way of life because of their interaction with traders and other people.”



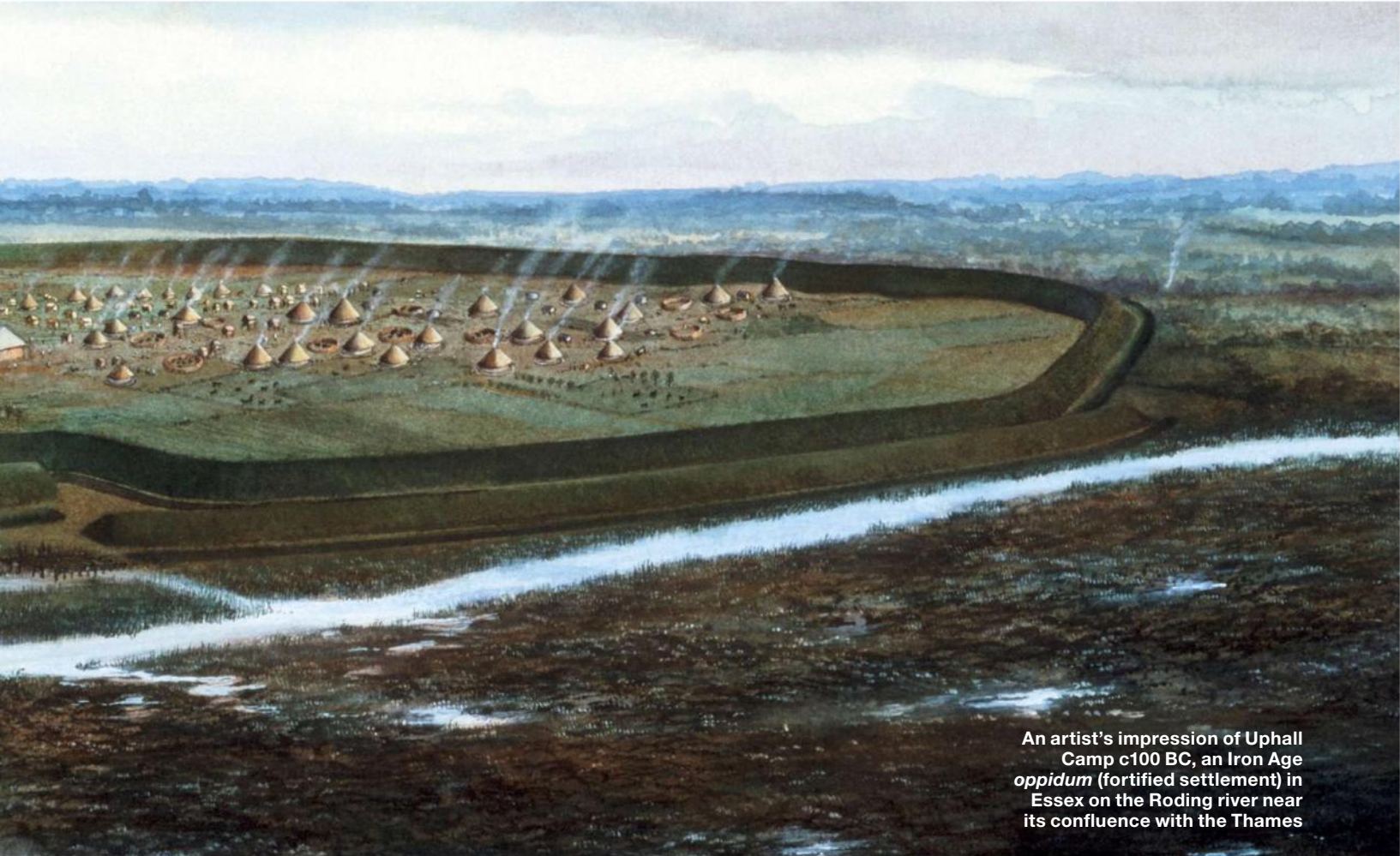
A bronze Iron Age escutcheon found in Kent

A BOMBASTIC SOCIETY LIVED IN A STATE OF UNSTABLE EQUILIBRIUM: RIVALRIES COULD QUICKLY FLARE UP INTO SPASMS OF VIOLENCE

He also described the offshore island of Ictis, where tinnerns took their knucklebone-shaped ingots to exchange the metal with foreign traders. From Ictis it took a journey of 30 days for the tin to reach the Mediterranean.

During his circumnavigation of Britain, Pytheas will have become aware of the great differences in the lives of its people, particularly between those living on the west and east sides of the island. The west was part of the maritime system that linked the Atlantic-facing parts of Europe, and was dominated by small communities – families and extended families – who lived in a variety of defended enclosures: the rounds of Cornwall, the raths of Wales, and the duns and brochs of Scotland. There was a heavy pastoral bias to the economy and, because much of the region was mountainous, the sea featured large in local and wider communication.

The eastern side of the country was quite distinct. In many eastern regions settlements tended to be larger, more like extended villages, and defence or enclosure was less evident. The cultivation of cereals was also more widespread, but the subsistence economy varied from place to place depending on local conditions. In his description of Britain, Diodorus (probably using Pytheas as a source) described the simple houses of the Britons, built from timber and reeds, going on to explain that: “Their way of harvesting their grain is to cut off only the heads and



An artist's impression of Uphall Camp c100 BC, an Iron Age *oppidum* (fortified settlement) in Essex on the Roding river near its confluence with the Thames

store them in roofed buildings... each day they select the ripened heads and grind them... their behaviour is simple... their lifestyle is modest since they are beyond the reach of luxury which comes from wealth."

Status symbols

The people were ruled, Diodorus wrote, by many kings and aristocrats "who generally live in peace with each other". He also mentioned the use of chariots in war, for which there is ample archaeological evidence, especially the metal fittings for harnessing the paired horses, and the attachments for the vehicles. In some areas, particularly in Yorkshire, a person of high standing might be buried with a chariot in his or her grave to signify status. Chariot building and chariot riding must have been learned through contact with communities on the other side of the North Sea.

Between the west and east sides of Britain was a central zone stretching from the south coast across the Welsh borderland to north Wales. Here, hillforts dominated, reflecting a different kind of society. These were communal structures built to impress and, as the archaeological evidence amply shows, they often served as defences against attack in times of war. They speak of a bombastic society controlled by powerful chieftains, living in a state of unstable equilibrium in which rivalries could quickly flare up into spasms of violence.



An artist's impression of an Iron Age chariot. Such vehicles were buried in the graves of high-status individuals



Maiden Castle, Dorset, is one of the largest Iron Age hillforts in Europe – at its peak, in the century or so before the Claudian invasion, it was home to several hundred people

A gold Gallo-Belgic *stater*, found in Buckinghamshire. Such high-status coins reached pre-Roman Britain probably as gifts to maintain allegiances



BRITISH SLAVES HAD BECOME A PRIZED COMMODITY, WHICH MUST HAVE ENCOURAGED RAIDING, FURTHER INCREASING SOCIAL TENSIONS

Britain, then, was a varied place, and by no means unified. Indeed, the inhabitants of the eastern side of the country probably had far more in common with their neighbours across the North Sea in continental Europe than they did with Britons living on the Atlantic coasts. This raises the fascinating question of language. Most Britons probably spoke dialects of Celtic, but it is not at all unlikely that the east coasters were also able to speak a Germanic language to facilitate communications with their contacts across the North Sea.

Continental influence

Around 150 BC, things began to change in the south-east of the island, roughly the area south and east of the Jurassic ridge running from Lincolnshire to Dorset. These changes were brought about by increasing contacts across the English Channel. The first clear sign of this was the adoption of coinage in Britain, modelled on the Gallo-Belgic coins of northern France. There is also some evidence to suggest an incursion of Belgae (tribes from northern Gaul) into the Solent region, from where they spread north through Hampshire. Caesar had heard talk of this, and mentioned it in his commentary on his Gallic Wars.

A more distant event was also to have an impact on Britain. In 121 BC the Romans finally appropriated the southern coastal region of France and established the Provincia Romana. This brought to southern Gaul a flood of Roman traders intent on exploiting the raw materials and slaves that could be culled from the region in return for luxury goods and

wine. Because wine was produced in surplus in the north Italian estates, Gaul was a convenient place to turn it into a quick profit, not least because the Gauls had a particular fondness for it. Wine was exported to Gaul in large pottery amphorae, which have the great advantage that they are almost indestructible and turn up aplenty on archaeological sites, showing that wine was being traded right across Gaul to the Channel coast.

Sometime around 100 BC, Roman wine and other luxury goods such as glass and figs began to be shipped across the Channel by Breton middlemen to the port of Hengistbury Head on the coast of Dorset. For a brief period of a decade or two Hengistbury became a thriving seasonal market. Commodities were stockpiled here from various parts of southern Britain to trade for the Roman wine and the other exotic commodities gathered by Bretons to make up their cargoes of trade goods. What exactly Britain had to offer at that time is not certain but, writing a few decades later, Strabo could list the principal exports of the island as metals, cereals, hides, slaves and hunting dogs.

The sudden availability of luxury goods and the new demand for raw materials and slaves seems to have had a significant effect on central southern Britain. The production of surpluses for export began to change native subsistence agriculture – but more important was the new value placed on slaves. They had become a prized commodity, which must have encouraged raiding, further increasing social tensions.



Mediterranean amphorae unearthed from a pre-Roman burial at Panshanger in Hertfordshire – more evidence of long-distance commerce

The commercial route between Brittany and the Solent region can easily be traced in the archaeological record, in part through discoveries of amphorae in the region – evidence of the Roman wine to which Breton middlemen had ready access. But there were other contacts along the whole of the Channel interface. This is demonstrated by the numbers of gold Gallo-Belgic *staters* (coins) found along the Sussex coast and on either side of the Thames estuary. High-value coins of this kind would not have been used in ordinary commercial interaction but were probably circulated as gifts to establish and maintain systems of allegiance and patronage.

Two comments made by Julius Caesar are of particular interest. He said that Diviciacus, king of the Suessiones, a Gaulish tribe, had dominions in Britain. This implies that he was a 'great king' who could claim the allegiance of other tribes. As such, he would be expected to make lavish gifts to his clients. The other statement was that Britons crossed to Gaul and joined the opposition to Caesar – troops who might well have been paid in bullion.

During the period 150–50 BC the communities of south-east Britain were drawn into



A gold *aureus* depicting Julius Caesar. His forays helped open Britain to Roman trade

THE BRITISH ELITE WERE BEGINNING TO ADOPT ROMAN VALUES AND MANNERS

close contact with their continental neighbours. The minting of increasing quantities of coins of lower denominations suggests that commercial engagements were beginning to become more common – the early stages in the emergence of a market economy. But beyond, to the north and west of the Jurassic ridge, the old style of life remained little changed. There was an increasing demand for slaves but the exotic luxuries now enjoyed in the south-east seldom got this far.

Roman incursions

The arrival of Julius Caesar in Gaul in 58 BC changed everything. By 51 BC, the whole of Gaul had been incorporated into the Roman world, and the Britons of the coastal region faced a continent undergoing massive social and economic change. Caesar's two forays into Britain, in 55 and 54 BC, achieved no new conquests but went some way to opening up the island to Roman traders. One lasting legacy of Caesar's brief intervention into British affairs was that he got a powerful tribe, the Catuvellauni, to agree not to molest their neighbours, the Trinovantes, whose core territory was originally in Essex. After Gaul

Bronze mirrors with ornately decorated backs, typical of the later British Iron Age



Glass gaming counters. Imported gaming pieces became more popular after the Roman invasion

had settled down under Roman rule, these two tribes benefited from the fast-developing trade across the Channel. Large quantities of wine were imported, together with Italian bronze and silver work, jugs, cups and bowls, and high-quality pottery made in northern Gaul. Other exotic imports such as gaming pieces and toilet implements show that the British elite in the south-east were beginning to adopt Roman values and manners. These new consumer durables would have been used by aristocratic households, and choice pieces, including complete amphorae and even silver cups, were buried with the dead, proclaiming the status and aspirations of the lineage.

How these commercial interactions were manipulated in the period 50 BC–AD 43 we can only guess, but in all probability Roman merchants established themselves in some of Britain's major commercial centres. There is some evidence for this in Braughing in Essex, where pots scratched with Latin graffiti have been found.

The intensification of trade led to significant changes in the south-east. Fortified towns (*oppida*) developed, often at intersections where, for example, a road might cross a

river; examples include Winchester, Silchester, Verulamium (St Albans) and Camulodunum (Colchester). That these sites had all become of real commercial importance is shown by the fact that after the Roman invasion of Britain in AD 43 all developed into major towns.

By the early decades of the first century AD, the south-eastern corner of Britain had become an advanced core zone made up of about 16 distinct polities, each with at least one urban centre. South of the Thames the tribe known as the Atrebatas seems to have been dominant, while the territory to the north of the river was controlled by the Catuvellauni. Beyond this semi-urbanised core lay a periphery of four tribal confederations: the Durotriges in Dorset, the Dobunni in the Cotswolds, the Corieltauvi in the east Midlands and the Iceni in East Anglia, each issuing its own coinage. The social system and economy were still rooted in early traditions but larger market centres were beginning to appear.

Beyond this region, in the west and north life continued largely as it had for centuries; even the old hillforts continued to be used. It was from this outer zone that many of the

commodities used in the complex networks of exchange came: tin, copper, gold, hides and, of course, the ever-valuable slaves.

Around AD 40 political tensions both within and between the Atrebatas and the Catuvellauni came to a head. Would-be contenders for power competed with each other, and those who failed fled to Rome with their followers. Adminius, who had ruled in Kent, escaped the island in AD 39, and Verica of the Atrebatas fled in AD 42. Both presented themselves as friends of Rome, and looked to the state to support their causes. For ambitious Roman emperors, eager for new conquests, the pleas of aristocratic British refugees presented a God-given justification for invasion. **H**

Barry Cunliffe is emeritus professor of European archaeology at the University of Oxford, and author of *Iron Age Britain* (Batsford, 2004)

DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

► **Britain BC: Life in Britain and Ireland Before the Romans** by Francis Pryor (HarperCollins, 2003)



A first-century AD Romano-British terracotta lamp showing a Roman ship. Julius Caesar's first invasion was stymied by bad weather that damaged his fleet



THE ROMAN INVASION

10 BIG QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CONQUEST

The Claudian invasion of AD 43 was a triumph of Roman military might and civilisation against proud and steadfast native resistance. Or was it? **Gillian Hovell** answers 10 key questions about the start of the Roman occupation



The Roman invasion of Britain is an old, old story, but one that rewards re-examining. Five years ago, the reconstruction and display of the Hallaton helmet – a ceremonial Roman helmet found in an Iron Age shrine – prompted just that, shining a spotlight on relations between the invaders and the Britons, which were much more complex than often imagined. Did Britons really, as the helmet's discovery implied, fight side by side with the Romans against their own people? Why might they have swapped their loyalties? And, even with local support, was it really an easy ride for the Romans?

By combining archaeological discoveries with reports from ancient historians, we can piece together the events and motives of the time. From these, startling questions arise: were the Britons more prepared than the first Romans to march into this unexplored world?

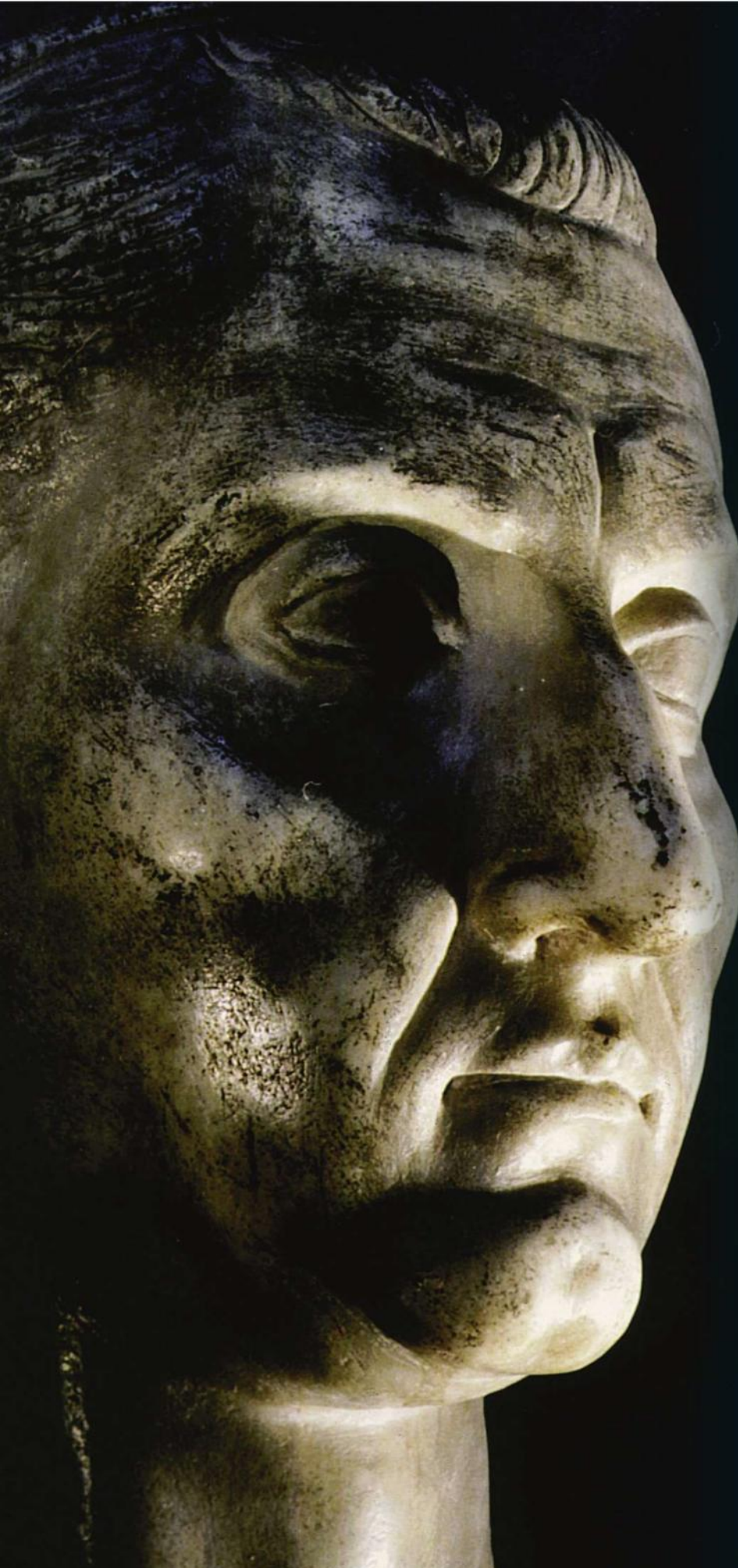
WHAT IS THE HALLATON HELMET?

This Roman parade helmet, of a type worn by Roman auxiliary cavalrymen, was found on a native British shrine in 2000 near Hallaton, Leicestershire. Made of sheet iron covered with silver sheet, partly decorated with gold leaf, it was probably produced between AD 25 and AD 50, around the date of the conquest of Britain in AD 43. One of the earliest Roman helmets found in Britain, it is on display at Harborough Museum, Market Harborough. An artist's impression of the helmet when new is shown on page 31.

What opportunities for personal advancement did some Britons seize, while others continued to put up such determined resistance that, in 400 years of Roman occupation, Britain never truly lost its identity as a military frontier province? Just what was the real story?

Julius Caesar, who visited Britain twice – in 55 BC and again the following year

REX/GETTY



WHY DID CAESAR ONLY COME, SEE... AND THEN LEAVE AGAIN?

Rome first invaded Britain back in 55 BC – or tried to. Julius Caesar had just spent three years conquering Gaul, and he knew that Britons were supporting the Gallic resistance there. A punitive attack to put the interfering Britons in their place was due. He intended not only to prove Rome's might, but also to return laden with booty and with military and political glory for himself. After all, the invasion and conquest of a new, untamed land was an accepted traditional route to political success.

So he led two legions across the Channel and arrived on the south coast of Britain in August 55 BC. However, the tidal waters at Deal made it impossible to beach his ships and his army was forced to wade ashore in full armour, leaving them in no state to meet the local warriors who were waiting for them. The Romans survived but victory eluded both sides because the Britons used guerrilla tactics and avoided a pitched battle of the kind to which the Roman army was accustomed.

The weather worsened and the Roman fleet was virtually destroyed in a storm. Caesar retreated and limped home, having underestimated the resistance he would meet. He returned the following year for a face-saving expedition, this time with more soldiers and the addition of cavalry to counter the Britons' devastating war chariots. Shocked, the Britons buried their differences and united together under Cassivellaunus, the king of the Catuvellauni tribe. Tribal enmities proved too ingrained, though, and Cassivellaunus was betrayed. Caesar extracted tribute and returned triumphant to Rome – but he never came back to Britain.

**THE CONQUEST
OF A NEW,
UNTAMED LAND
WAS AN ACCEPTED
TRADITIONAL
ROUTE TO
POLITICAL SUCCESS**



A coin showing Roman emperor Claudius, who needed a prestigious invasion to thrive in power

WHAT PUSHED CLAUDIUS TO INVADE?

Nearly 100 years after Julius Caesar's two forays, Rome again invaded Britain. After Caesar's expeditions, the geographer Strabo had written, rather defensively, that "although the Romans could have held Britain, they scorned to do so, because they saw that there was nothing at all to fear from the Britons (for they are not strong enough to cross over and attack us). And", he continued, "they saw that there was no corresponding advantage to be gained by seizing and holding their country."

Nonetheless, the limping, trembling and militarily inexperienced Emperor Claudius knew (like Caesar) that he needed military success to thrive in power, and that a prestigious invasion could provide him with the greatest honour any Roman could hope for: a triumphal procession in Rome, and all the glory and popularity that went with it. A victorious invasion of a barbarian land would also serve to boost Roman morale and to distract from troubles at home.

He was well equipped. Three years earlier, Emperor Caligula had drafted legions specially to invade Britain, but had never used them. They were idle and dangerously restless – so when in AD 42 a request for help came from Verica of the Atrebates tribe (who had been ousted from power by Caratacus, king of the Catuvellauni), Claudius was ready.

EMPEROR CALIGULA HAD DRAFTED LEGIONS SPECIALLY TO INVADE BRITAIN, BUT HAD NEVER USED THEM

HOW DID THE INVASION OF AD 43 BEGIN?

Emperor Claudius gave command of the invasion to the general Aulus Plautius, who led legions, cavalry and auxiliary troops across to Britain. They arrived unopposed in three groups, though it is not clear where they landed; Richborough and the Solent have been suggested. Defeating Catuvellaunian attacks, they reached a river, perhaps the Medway or the Thames.

The Britons were carelessly encamped on the west side, thinking that the Roman army couldn't cross the fast, wide river without a bridge, but the Romans had recruited Celts who were practiced at swimming in full armour. These auxiliary troops crossed to the enemy camp and maimed the horses that drew the Britons' formidable battle chariots. The Roman advance towards London continued and the Catuvellaunian king Caratacus fled to Wales,

where he instigated opposition to Rome for years.

No other tribe could come close to the military strength of the Catuvellauni and, one by one, they surrendered to Rome. Aulus Plautius then sent a message to Claudius, inviting him to come to Britain and to personally make a triumphal entry into Colchester. Some weeks later Claudius arrived, together with war elephants. This wasn't just for show: their smell was known to drive enemy horses mad, and the Britons' skill in chariots was likely to be a real threat, even then. Colchester was taken, and Claudius declared Britain conquered. After just 16 days, he headed home to receive the applause and glory of a triumphal entry into Rome, while Plautius was left to consolidate the conquest across the rest of Britain.



The tombstone of a Roman auxiliary cavalryman, found in 1928 in Colchester, portrays a soldier riding over the cowering naked body of an enemy

HOW STRONG WAS THE ROMAN ARMY?

Aulus Plautius commanded perhaps up to 40,000 professional soldiers in Britain. This army's true strength, though, lay not just in numbers nor in the mix of regular legionaries and skilled auxiliaries but in the way the soldiers trained together, spent their adult lives in military service together and, following precise orders, fought in a disciplined and controlled manner. The Britons, on the other hand, were fierce warriors who fought for individual honour, as and when required.

The contrasts were highly visual, too: the Romans were heavily armoured (an individual legionary probably wore more iron in his helmet, breastplate and weaponry than the typical Briton saw in a lifetime) and they advanced as a unified whole, shields protecting neighbours, and with short, stabbing swords that encouraged close teamwork and close combat. The Britons, however – so the Romans tell us – looked more like beasts than men: they howled battle shrieks and cries, fearlessly stripped off for battle, painted themselves with the blue dye of the woad plant, and caked their long wild hair, tousled beards and moustaches with limed water into white spikes. They excelled at ambushes and quick strikes, and fought so skilfully that they could launch spears and wield shields and swords at full gallop, leap on and off their chariots at speed, and even in mid-battle stand on the pole and run from the chariot to the rugged but agile ponies.

The Romans' speed was more measured: despite the weight of equipment they carried, they were hardened to long and swift marches, after which they would dig ramparts and set up marching camps each night. They would build strategic wooden (and later stone) forts for a more permanent presence – theirs was no hit and run invasion. The message was clear: Romans were here to stay.

This second-century bronze statuette shows the dress of a typical Roman legionary



AN INDIVIDUAL ROMAN
LEGIONARY PROBABLY
**WORE MORE IRON IN HIS
HELMET, BREASTPLATE
AND WEAPONRY THAN
THE TYPICAL BRITON
SAW IN A LIFETIME**



A c48 BC depiction of Vercingetorix, a Celtic leader who fought Julius Caesar during the Gallic War

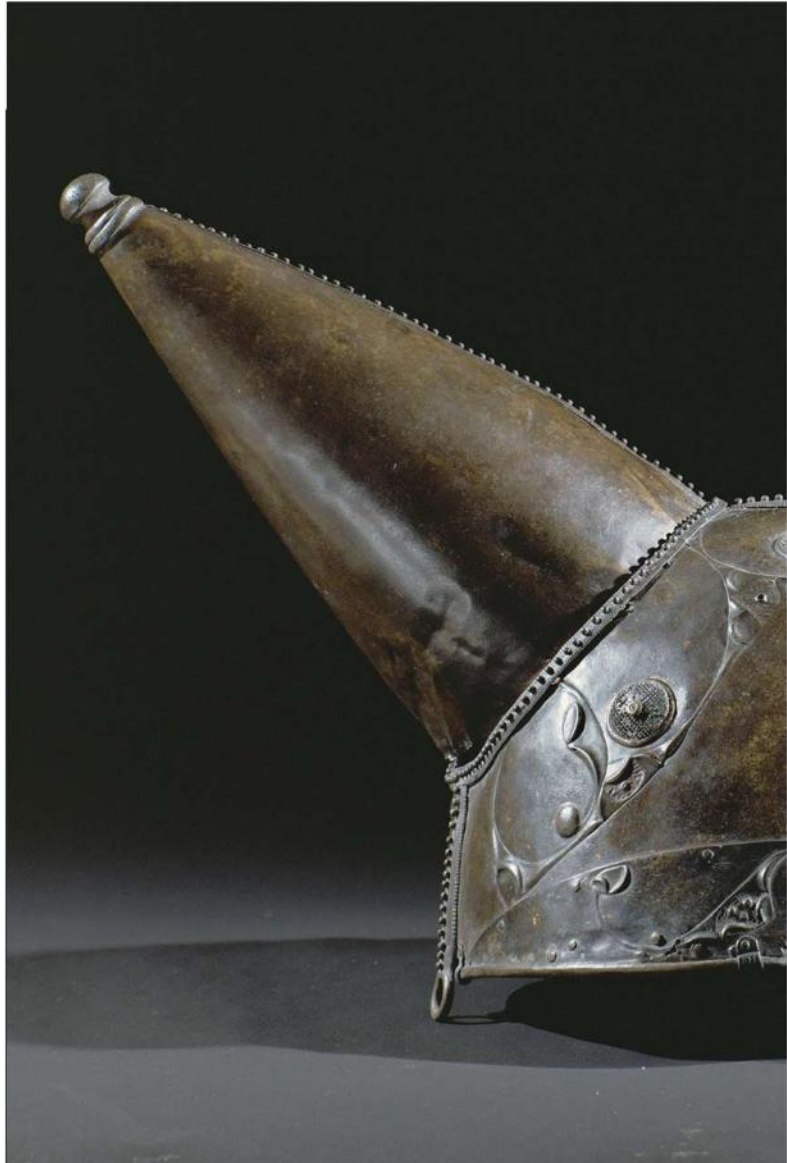
DID THE BRITONS KNOW THAT THE ROMANS WERE COMING?

The arrival of the Romans was not a surprise to the Britons. Previous contact between them certainly existed. Decades of trade had brought cultural influences such as coins as well as amphorae of wine to Britain. Some Britons had fought with the Gauls against Rome in Caesar's Gallic War – the military might and ambitions of Rome were not just recognised but had been experienced. And Caesar said that some tribes, learning of the invasion from traders, sent envoys to him in Gaul to sue for peace. Nonetheless, the English Channel must have provided a buffer – a sense

of protection – not just for the Romans but also for the Britons, who were engrossed in their own local tribal disputes. Caesar's first invasion may have seemed like just another border challenge.

After Caesar's failed incursions, the Britons may even have felt rather superior. It was only the arrival of around 40,000 soldiers in AD 43 that prompted them to work together. Either they were shocked into it (and therefore not so prepared after all), or perhaps they had already considered and prepared for the undignified possibility of having to join forces against the common enemy.

IT WAS ONLY THE ARRIVAL OF AROUND **40,000 ROMAN SOLDIERS** IN AD 43 THAT PROMPTED THE BRITONS TO WORK TOGETHER



DID THE ROMANS HAVE SUPPORT FROM NATIVE BRITONS?

The traditional view of the invasion is a straightforward tale of the organised Romans sailing over, marching across the land and subduing the primitive Britons. The reality appears to have been less clear-cut.

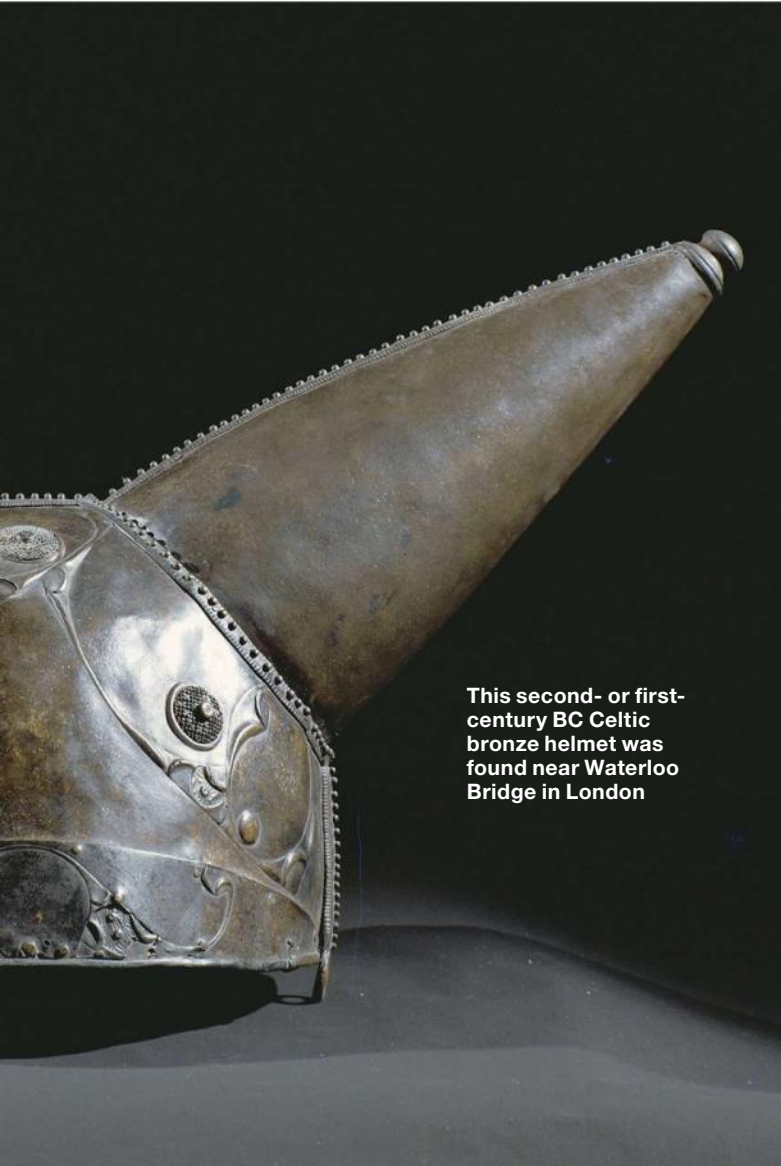
The Britons' loyalties were divided: a warrior people, they sought status by violently taking other tribes' lands and people as slaves, and their inability to abandon the traditional in-fighting of these tribal rivalries weakened them and indirectly helped the Romans.

Though the Britons were certainly tough and warlike, they were also opportunistic and capable of changing loyalties as it

suited them: the cut-throat inter-tribal conflicts often provided the Romans with allies. Celtic soldiers even served in the Roman army, either to help to defeat a tribal enemy or to get ahead personally – a conscious decision to side with the potential winners and to receive a reward (such as the Hallaton helmet, perhaps).

Indeed, some tribal chiefs openly surrendered to the Romans in order to share the victory and to acquire power and status. Being a puppet chief of the Romans would allow them to rake in the material benefits and luxuries of the empire, and could be preferable to honourable defeat and slaughter.

AKG IMAGES



This second- or first-century BC Celtic bronze helmet was found near Waterloo Bridge in London

The Britons, though, were no walkover: their skills in chariot warfare and guerrilla tactics were highly effective in reducing the efficiency of the trained Roman units. It was only in the south-east that the Romans really quashed opposition.

The Roman conquest of Britain was never a foregone conclusion. Even nearly 20 years on, excessively heavy-handed Roman rule prompted the rebellion of the Iceni, led by Queen Boudica, whose followers razed the new Roman towns of Londinium (London), Verulamium (St Albans) and Camulodunum (Colchester) to the ground – an

uprising in which 70,000 people were killed before the Romans regained control. Farther north and in Wales, the Britons continued to resist violently. They were never really settled nor Romanised at ground-roots level, and the army remained an active presence throughout the occupation.

Because we talk of ‘Roman Britain’, we tend to forget that most of Scotland, despite some Roman incursions, remained unconquered and was never truly won over. And Ireland was never invaded. ‘Roman Britain’ was essentially only Roman England and (less securely) Wales.

SOME TRIBAL CHIEFS OPENLY SURRENDERED TO THE ROMANS IN ORDER TO SHARE THE VICTORY AND TO ACQUIRE POWER

GETTY

WHAT DID THE ROMANS THINK BRITAIN WOULD BE LIKE?

The Romans viewed the Britons as deeply barbaric. Rumours of druidic rites and human sacrifices, and tales of enemies being head hunted, were so rife that Claudius’s soldiers refused to set sail across the channel until his freedman, Narcissus, was sent to shame them into action – it took the humiliation of a telling-off by an ex-slave to overcome their fear and to get them moving. Some 15 years later, Roman soldiers would again be rooted to the spot in terror when attacking the druid stronghold of Anglesey. The Romans were definitely leaving their comfort zone and entering an alien land.

Tacitus, the Roman historian, expressed their fear when he imagined a Briton chief pronouncing: “our very remoteness, in a land known only to rumour, has, until now, protected us.”

It was such rumours of barbarism that inspired the Romans to believe they would be doing these Britons a favour by conquering them, occupying the country and enforcing the civilised ways of Rome.

A Celtic stone head from south-west England. The Romans considered the Britons to be barbaric and in need of civilising



WHEN DID THE INVASION FINISH AND THE OCCUPATION BEGIN?

Claudius considered the occupation of Britain to have begun as soon as Colchester fell: the tribes encountered up to that point had capitulated, and Claudius ordered inscriptions to be set up around the empire, glorifying his defeat of 11 tribal kings.

There was still much work to be done, though. An army headed northwards from Colchester and the Catuvellauni territories into the Midlands, while Vespasian (the future emperor) led an army west, taking 20 Iron Age forts including Maiden Castle. By AD 47, the Romans held England from the river Humber in the north to the estuary of the river Severn in the south-west. It was a remarkable achievement.

Yet the concept of a 'Roman Britain' can be applied only to urban life. It might be said to have existed once the Britons began to accept and adopt Roman ways – when they considered themselves part of the empire and made Rome work to their personal advantage.

The peaceful and thriving south did truly adopt Roman culture, but the north remained a military zone, and Wales was frequently troublesome. Roman Britain was a land linked by a web of forts and military roads, and it is telling that – unlike any other Roman provinces – no Briton who ever went to Rome itself made it big there.

Nonetheless, right from the moment when the first British chiefs yielded, Rome's eagle had them in her grip. Roman Britain had tentatively begun and, from then on, the everyday life of urban Britons would look increasingly Roman.

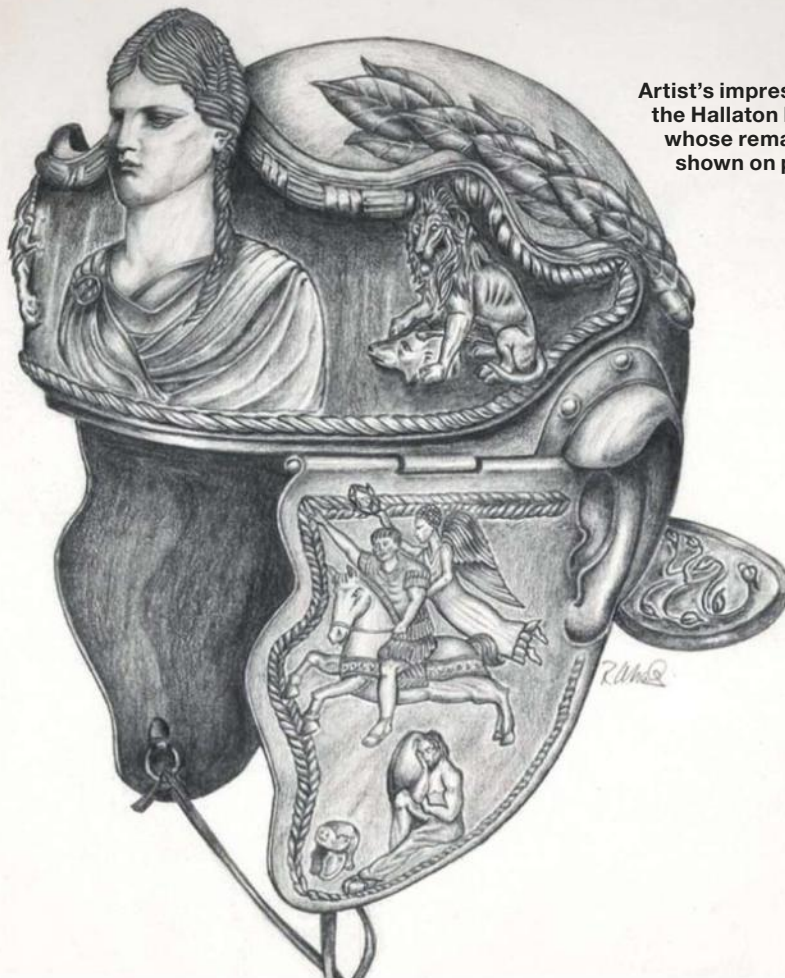
THE NORTH REMAINED A MILITARY ZONE AND WALES WAS FREQUENTLY TROUBLESOME



Colchester's Balkerne Gate, the best-preserved Roman gateway in Britain, was part of the substantial defensive wall built from AD 70 after the city was razed by the Iceni during the revolt led by Boudica



BOB WHALE HISTORICAL ILLUSTRATIONS



Artist's impression of the Hallaton helmet, whose remains are shown on page 24

HOW MUCH DO WE *REALLY* KNOW ABOUT THIS STORY?

The archaeological evidence for the invasion years is sparse, yielding little more than shadows of wooden forts and echoes of violent warfare – for example, the artillery bolts that litter Maiden Castle. This is why the Hallaton helmet, ritually buried at a Leicestershire Iron Age shrine within a mere two years of the initial invasion of AD 43, is so important. This rich gift from Rome, heavy with 'victory' symbols, suggests serious collaboration by the locals.

Of course, it could have been stolen – a trophy of a raid. But archaeology combines with Roman literature (there were no writers in the illiterate British Iron Age) to reveal that some ambitious Britons were quick to seize opportunities for personal advancement. The Greek historian of Rome, Dio Cassius, recorded that Celtic soldiers served in the Roman army. And even before Claudius's invasion, Strabo reckoned that dues from British trade provided richer pickings than any invasion might supply.

Through such trade, Roman culture seeped in. Iron Age coins mimicked Roman coinage (one chief's coins bore the image of a Roman-style helmet – an interesting symbol when we consider the Hallaton helmet) and archaeologists found fine Roman dining ware even in the royal huts of the northern Brigantian stronghold at Iron Age Stanwick.

Within a few years of the invasion, buildings such as Fishbourne Palace and Brading Villa and towns such as London and St Albans appeared. But the Romans didn't have it all their own way. Even as victors, they recorded continuing tales of frightened Roman soldiers and terrifying resistance. The Britons were clearly fierce, headstrong and independent-minded.

Rome may have declared herself the master of Britain, but many Britons made Rome serve their own purposes. As more details, such as the Hallaton helmet, emerge from archaeology, each new clue adds to the complex and fascinating story of the Roman invasion of Britain. **H**

Gillian Hovell is an author, lecturer, historian and archaeologist. For more information, visit www.muddyarchaeologist.co.uk

DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

- **Roman Britain** by Gillian Hovell (Crimson Publishing, 2012)
- **Roman Britain: A New History** by Guy de la Bédoyère (Thames and Hudson, 2013)
- **Roman Britain: A Sourcebook** by Stanley Ireland (Routledge, 2008)




“WE WILL FIGHT WELL BECAUSE WE ARE FREE”

CALGACUS

At the battle of Mons Graupius, AD 83 or 84

Despite the brutal suppression of British revolts against Roman rule, the empire's writers tended to portray rebels such as Boudica in a surprisingly positive light. **Charlotte Higgins** seeks to explain this curious turn of events



LEFT: A detail from a second-century AD relief depicting a barbarian fighting a Roman legionary. The historian Tacitus made a point of lionising British rebel commanders' exploits as a means of highlighting Rome's moral and political deficiencies



A bronze head of Roman emperor Claudius, who was won over by Caratacus's chutzpah

“IF YOU SAVE ME, I SHALL BE AN EVERLASTING MEMORIAL TO YOUR MERCY”

CARATACUS

To Claudius in Rome, AD 50

Caratacus was the son of King Cunobelinus, a potentate in what is now south-east England. He is associated by Roman historians with aggressive expansionism in Britain that threatened to unsettle the status quo in northern Gaul and thus prompted the

Roman invasion of AD 43. Defeated in battle by the invading forces, he eluded capture and fled to Wales then, at length, to the territory of the Brigantes in what is now Yorkshire. There, the queen of the Brigantes, Cartimandua, handed him over to the

Romans. Caratacus was transported to Rome in AD 50, where, according to Tacitus, he had become a famous name. Paraded through the streets with the other captives, he confronted the emperor, Claudius, who spared his life.

In AD 43 Aulus Plautius, general under the emperor Claudius, prepared to invade Britain. But, according to the second- to third-century Roman historian Cassius Dio, things nearly went badly wrong before his army had even left the coast of Gaul. The troops virtually mutinied, refusing to venture “outside the known world”, Dio wrote. Finally, Claudius’s powerful henchman Narcissus, a freedman, harangued them. Coming from a civilian and a former slave, this was too much for the troops, who were shamed into action.

The Romans made short work of south-east Britain. Two of the main leaders of the British, the brothers Togodumnus and Caratacus, were defeated in separate battles after which Togodumnus perished and Caratacus went on the run. In the meantime, Aulus Plautius summoned the emperor who arrived with, says Cassius Dio, a contingent of war elephants to take the British stronghold of Camulodunum – the site of modern Colchester. A triumphal arch in Rome records that Claudius received the surrender of 11 British kings.

And yet the subjection of Britain was far from being as clean and decisive as Claudius later boasted in Rome. Although some of the peoples of Britain were friendly to the Romans and did not resist their advance, the

slog of conquering and peacekeeping was a lengthy one. It was not until nearly 40 years later, after a great battle in north-east Scotland, that the Romans, under the governor Agricola, could claim to have defeated the whole island. But even then it was a hollow victory, since the Romans withdrew quickly and the Highlands of Scotland were never fully conquered.

In fact, Britain has been called “Rome’s Afghanistan” by classical historian Mary Beard. Conquest was patchy, the terrain difficult and the Britons, with their guerrilla tactics and frustrating habit of melting into marshes, forests and mountains, hit the Roman legions, who were virtually unbeatable in pitched battle, at their weak spot.

So what became of Caratacus, the British military leader and son of the great king Cunobelinus (later transformed by Shakespeare into Cymbeline)? Thanks to the first- to second-century AD Roman historian Tacitus – the main source on the AD 43 assault on Britain and the 40 years or so following it – we next hear of Caratacus seven years after, leading the Britons in south and then north Wales. Here, no doubt, the hilly, inaccessible territory helped him and his men as they slipped from wood to cave to mountain.

Caratacus was finally run to ground by the relentless Roman war machine, and defeated

in battle at a hillfort somewhere in the territory of the Ordovices, a tribe of north Wales. Caratacus himself escaped from the melee and sought protection in northern England with the Brigantes – but that tribe’s queen, Cartimandua, handed him over to the Romans. As Tacitus has it, in the years that had elapsed since Claudius claimed Britain at Camulodunum, Caratacus had become a famous name in Italy. And so the capture of this elusive guerrilla leader, “whose name was not without a certain glory”, offered the opportunity for a spectacular public relations exercise in Rome. “There was huge curiosity to see the man who for so many years had spurned our power,” wrote Tacitus.

And so Claudius laid on a show, carefully stage-managed to make the capture reflect as gloriously as possible on himself. A parade was organised, with Caratacus’s splendid gold torcs and war booty carried aloft, and his companions, wife and children trailing behind. Finally came Caratacus himself who, according to Tacitus, was the only prisoner of war who walked with his head held high.

Approaching the tribunal on which Claudius sat, Caratacus boldly addressed the emperor on equal terms, saying that under different circumstances he might have been welcomed to Rome as a friend rather than dragged there as a captive. “I had horses, men,

arms, riches,” he declared. “Is it any wonder that I should lose them unwillingly? If you wish to rule the world, does it follow that everybody else should accept slavery? If I had been dragged before you having surrendered immediately, nobody would have heard of either my defeat or your victory. If you punish me, everybody will forget this moment. But if you save me, I shall be an everlasting memorial to your mercy.” Claudius was convinced by this shrewd appeal to his reputation, and pardoned the Briton and his family. We know nothing more of them after this point.

Attack on the empire

Tacitus’s description of these events is remarkable: the Briton employs the quintessentially Roman skill of rhetoric, using it to best the emperor himself. Not for the first (nor last) time, a Roman writer was using the figure of a defeated enemy – one who is shown to possess true Roman virtues – to launch a bitter critique of the imperial project.

Caratacus is one of a trio of figures from the British resistance given surprising prominence by Tacitus – the others being Boudica and the now less-well-known Caledonian general Calgacus, to whom we shall return.

What is intriguing about them is the extent to which – alongside their qualities as savage, frightening and barbaric figures – they are also given voices and certain virtues by the historian. In turn, it is these noble qualities that have enabled the figures to be regarded in later British history and culture as early native heroes; indeed, they are the first named characters in British history who have attached to them more than just a name, and anything approaching a ‘story’. In fact, it is only through characterisation by Tacitus and, later, Cassius Dio, that we know them at all. There is no direct archaeological evidence that they existed, beyond a few coins that have been found bearing the legend CARA – which may or may not refer to Caratacus.

Boudica is the most famous of the three, not least because of Thomas Thornycroft’s magnificent sculpture of her driving her war chariot towards Westminster Bridge and the Houses of Parliament in London. Under the rule of her husband, Prasutagus, the Iceni had been allies of Rome. But when Prasutagus died, leaving his kingdom and property equally divided between his own daughters and Claudius’s successor, the emperor Nero, things went badly wrong.

The Roman military, records Tacitus, seized Iceni property, flogged the queen and raped her daughters. The flagrant abuses and grotesque humiliations were too much. With the brunt of the Roman forces far away tackling a Druid stronghold on Anglesey, Boudica and the Iceni seized their chance. They rampaged through the south-east and on to Camulodunum, where the behaviour of the Roman colonists – driving Britons from their land, treating them like slaves – had sparked outrage. Those Romans who could flee took refuge in the temple of the deified Claudius, which itself had become a hated symbol of foreign rule.

Camulodunum’s people appealed to the newly established town of Londinium for help, but the procurator (chief financial officer) sent only 200 ill-equipped troops. The town was otherwise undefended. The temple held out for two days before the town was captured and burned, its inhabitants massacred. Finally the 9th Legion arrived – only to be defeated by the rebels, who slaughtered its entire infantry and forced its commander, Petilius Cerealis, and cavalry to flee in ignominy. The procurator, too, fled from London to Gaul.

Finally, the Roman general Suetonius Paulinus marched back to the south-east



A coin of Boudica’s husband, Prasutagus, whose death sparked bloody insurrection

“WE HAVE
DESTROYED A
ROMAN LEGION.
WE WILL DO
SO AGAIN”

BOUDICA

Before her last stand near London, AD 60 or 61

Boudica was the wife of King Prasutagus of the Iceni, a tribe friendly to Rome, who lived in what is now East Anglia. On Prasutagus’s death the emperor Nero was named co-heir to his kingdom, but maltreatment of the king’s

family by imperial officials sparked rebellion, and Boudica fomented an uprising in AD 60/61 while the governor, Suetonius Paulinus, was occupied in the west. Her forces took and burned Camulodunum (Colchester), Verula-

mium (St Albans) and Londinium (London), massacring the inhabitants, before Suetonius Paulinus returned and routed her troops in pitched battle somewhere near London. Defeated, Boudica took poison.

from Anglesey and, despite the appeals of the inhabitants, decided to sacrifice London for the sake of the province as a whole. Everyone from the city who could not follow in his baggage train – the old, the sick, children – were left to be slaughtered. Verulamium, the Roman town beside modern St Albans, met the same fate as Camulodunum. In London, a layer of burnt material in the archaeological remains is thought to mark the sacking of the young city by Boudica.

Finally, Suetonius Paulinus engaged the rebels on a battlefield of his own choosing, somewhere near London. As with Caratacus, Tacitus puts into Boudica's mouth an extraordinary speech, delivered to her troops before the battle – though there is virtually no chance that Tacitus was drawing on knowledge of what, if anything, Boudica said to her troops. Nor would she, it hardly needs saying, have spoken in Latin. She is not, she said (according to Tacitus), speaking as the scion of a great royal house but as an ordinary woman avenging her lost freedom and her violated daughters. They had already destroyed a legion, and they could do it again – or would die trying.

Suetonius Paulinus's own speech is not obviously given any stronger claim to the reader's sympathy than the Briton's, except perhaps by way of an appeal to the military

discipline of his army against Boudica's rabble, which had more women in its ranks than men.

On whose side are we supposed to be at this moment? Ultimately, for certain, that of the Romans. But in the thick of the moment – as Boudica cries revenge for her raped girls and death or glory for her troops – it is hard to tell. At any rate, Suetonius Paulinus's victory was total. Fleeing Britons were trapped by their wagons, which ringed the battlefield. Women were not spared. Some 80,000 Britons were slaughtered (or so wrote Tacitus). Boudica killed herself by taking poison.

Perhaps the most revealing of the three encounters between British resistance leaders and Roman troops is the least well known today – the clash between the Caledonian leader Calgacus and the Roman governor of Britain, Agricola. For Tacitus, this encounter was close to the bone: Agricola was his father-in-law, and the historian thus had direct access to first-hand accounts of the governor's career. And Tacitus's project throughout his biography of his father-in-law (known today as 'the Agricola') was to lionise his illustrious connection.

He also had a broader project, though: a critique of the times in which he was living, following the reign of the repressive emperor Domitian, and a lament for a more glorious

age of Roman history, when its great men were unblemished by the vices of luxury and greed.

According to Tacitus, after several seasons of difficult campaigns in Scotland, the Romans reached Mons Graupius in AD 83 or 84. Here, says Tacitus, more than 30,000 men rallied to fight them. In Tacitus's account, Calgacus gives a great speech to his troops before the battle – one of the historian's most moving acts of rhetorical ventriloquism: "Today will be the birth of liberty for Britain," he declares. "We will fight well because we are free. Here in the remote north, far away from the grasp of tyranny, have been born the best of men. The Romans are the pillagers of the world [*raptores orbis*]. Neither east nor west has sated them. To theft, murder and raping they give the false name of power. They make a desert, and call it peace."

The speech is both a bitter critique of the moral vacuum at the heart of the imperial project, and an expression of a deep anxiety about its potential for collapse. But perhaps the idea of such disasters could be safely entertained precisely because they did not come about. The battle was a rout. The Caledonians scattered to the forests, where they were pursued by the relentless Romans. Bodies and limbs lay on the blood-soaked earth. The day after the battle, an unsettling

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NATIONAL GALLERIES OF SCOTLAND

THE REBELS' STOMPING GROUND

Explore landmarks in the Britons' fight for freedom, and discover surviving relics of their exploits

The enlightening museum believed to sit on the site of a Boudican massacre

Boudica, Caratacus and Calgacus are, aside from their existence in Tacitus's writing, shadowy figures, and it is often difficult to pinpoint precise locations for the events described by the historian. However, Tacitus recounts Boudica's sack of Camulodunum in vivid detail. As a result, the site of the temple to the deified Claudius in which the Romans were slaughtered is generally believed to be what is now Colchester Castle, built by the Normans on Roman foundations. The castle houses Colchester's recently refurbished museum, which features striking new interactive displays and a superb collection of Roman artefacts.

Colchester was Britannia's first provincial capital, and in AD 49 a colony of veteran soldiers from the 20th Legion was established there.



Pecuniary clues to Caratacus's power base

Like Boudica, Caratacus is strongly associated with Colchester. His father, Cunobelinus, was a potentate of the south-east of Britain, minting coins there and in Verulamium, modern St Albans. You can see examples of Cunobelinus's coins in Colchester Castle Museum. You'll also find pre-Roman coins minted by Tasciovanus, probably Cunobelinus's father, at Verulamium Museum, St Albans.



Romans were probably put to the sword on a site now occupied by Colchester Castle (above). INSET: Coins of British leaders Tasciovanus (centre) and Cunobelinus (right)



Calgacus stands tall among the leading figures in Scottish history in a huge frieze at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery

“TO THEFT, MURDER AND RAPING THEY GIVE THE FALSE NAME OF POWER”

CALGACUS

At the battle of Mons Graupius, AD 83

Calgacus was a leader of the Caledonians, a tribe defeated by Julius Agricola in a great battle in AD 83 or 84. He figures in Tacitus's biography of Agricola – purely, it seems, in order to deliver one of the historian's greatest set-piece speeches. Nothing else is known of him. However, as the first named character in Scottish history,

Calgacus features prominently in the great frieze that runs around the entrance hall of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. Created by William Hole in the 1890s, this mural operates as a parade of great Scottish figures such as David Livingstone, James Watt, Robert Burns, Adam Smith, David Hume and Mary, Queen of Scots.



This tubular torc (neck ring) from Snettisham in Norfolk may have been worn by an Iron Age aristocrat

Is Boudica stationed at King's Cross? Probably not

By long-standing tradition, the site of Boudica's final battle with Suetonius Paulinus was at King's Cross, formerly known as Battle Bridge. There is, alas, no evidence for this theory – nor for the notion that Boudica herself is buried beneath platform eight in King's Cross station.

On the trail of the Iceni

Boudica's homeland is hard to pin down – though we know that the Iceni heartlands were in East Anglia. Archaeology at the Roman town identified as Venta Icenorum – at Caistor St Edmund, just outside Norwich – has not yet yielded any sign of an Iron Age British predecessor. Nonetheless, it is an interesting and evocative site to visit. Nearby Norwich Castle Museum has a fine collection of Iceni and Roman artefacts, including magnificent gold torcs and other Iron Age artefacts from Snettisham.

Looking for Mons Graupius

The location of the battlefield of Mons Graupius has never been satisfactorily identified, though there are reasonable grounds for suggesting that it may have been Mount Bennachie, north-west of Aberdeen. Not far from here a large Roman marching camp was discovered in the 1970s.

silence hung in the air: the hills were deserted; torched buildings smoked in the distance.

What Tacitus does by vocalising the enemy so powerfully is to give Agricola a worthy enemy. Britain, by virtue of its distance from the corruption and decadence of Rome, provides his father-in-law with a kind of stage set on which he can be a true Roman in the old style. But in the end, the important thing is that despite these enemies having powerful voices and a gift for Roman-style rhetoric, they are the losers. In the end, the Roman war machine conquers all. **H**

Charlotte Higgins is chief culture writer of *The Guardian* and author of *Under Another Sky: Journeys in Roman Britain* (Jonathan Cape, 2013)

DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

- **Agricola and Germania** by Tacitus, trans by Harold Mattingly (Penguin, 2009)
- **Boudica: Iron Age Warrior Queen** by Richard Hingley and Christina Unwin (Hambledon Continuum, 2006)

RADIO

- Listen to Melvyn Bragg and guests discuss Boudica on the Radio 4 show **In Our Time** at www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00r7lr9

BBC
RADIO



WHEN BRITANNICA RULED THE WAVES

British sea power didn't begin in the 18th century but with the Roman fleet known as Classis Britannica - Britain's first navy. **Simon Elliott** explores the origin, achievements and end of this mighty armada



A detail from the frieze
adorning Trajan's Column
in Rome depicts a vessel of
the Roman fleet in eastern
Europe. Roman navies –
including the Classis
Britannica in Britain – were
key in military campaigns,
providing transport and
logistical support

In AD 69–70, the Rhine frontier was in tumult. The aftermath of Nero's reign and suicide had left not just Rome in disarray. During the so-called 'Year of the Four Emperors', the civil war that convulsed Rome as multiple rivals tussled for the imperial throne, disaffected former allies rebelled. Notable among them was Gaius Julius Civilis, an auxiliary Roman officer and prince of the Batavi, a prominent Germanic tribe of the Rhine delta in what's now the Netherlands.

Angered by Rome's treatment of his tribe after years of stalwart service – including important contributions to the invasion and subjugation of Britain from AD 43 – Civilis launched a revolt, persuading other nearby Germanic tribes to join him.

After a number of battles and sieges, Civilis was subdued. Tacitus, who recounted the story in his *Histories*, describes how the *Legio XIV Gemina* ('Twinned 14th Legion') was transported across from Britain to help the mopping-up operation. The legionary commander, Fabius Priscus, marched his troops to suppress the Nervii and Tungri tribes – and in doing so left his fleet exposed. The nearby Cannenefates tribe launched an assault, destroying or capturing most of the ships. And so the narrative of Britain's maritime power – this being the first recorded mention of the *Classis Britannica*, the first navy of Britain – enters the historical record in ignominy.

First fleet

The *Classis Britannica* was the regional fleet of the Roman province of Britannia from the mid-first century to the mid-third century, one of 10 such fleets across the empire. These fleets originated with the Augustan reforms of the Roman military, replacing the larger ad-hoc fleets that had served Rome well during its earlier conflicts in the Mediterranean.

The *Classis Britannica* as a named body came into being shortly before the AD 69/70 Batavian Revolt described earlier. However, the origins of the fleet stretch back to the Claudian invasion of Britain in AD 43.

After the initial invasion, the fleet took part in every aspect of the subsequent expansion across the islands of Britain, eventually taking geographical responsibility for the Atlantic approaches, the English Channel, the east and west coast of Britain and the North Sea basin. As is clear from its deployment to Germany during the Batavian revolt, it was also given responsibility for protecting the north-west European coast, with its headquarters fortress at Boulogne. Less than two centuries later, the *Classis Britannica* disappears from the historical record; the last known reference came in AD 249, relating to Saturninus, a



An AD 206 copper sestertius coin of emperor Septimius Severus bears the image of a galley. The *Classis Britannica* played a key role in his attempted conquest of Scotland

THE NARRATIVE OF
BRITAIN'S MARITIME
POWER – THIS BEING
THE FIRST MENTION
OF A NAVY OF BRITAIN
– ENTERS THE
HISTORICAL RECORD
IN IGNOMINY

North African-born captain.

During its existence, the *Classis Britannica* had more than one role. The commander of the British regional fleet was appointed directly by the emperor, and reported to the province's procurator, who was tasked with making the province pay. So the fleet undertook civilian tasks – for example, running key industrial enterprises such as the principal iron-working sites in the coastal weald. It was, though, primarily a military force, and its martial duties fell under the aegis of the province's governor. These military roles included controlling maritime zones around Britain, regular patrolling, gathering intelligence, transport, amphibious warfare and communications.

The chief fighting ship was the *liburnian*, a war galley equipped with ram and ballista. Being a small *bireme* (powered by two banks of oars), this was more agile than the larger *polyreme* galleys of the Republican navies. Numerous types of cutters and skiffs were also employed, as were a wide variety of transport ships. These were usually built in the Romano-Celtic tradition, with shallow hulls for navigating coastal waters, and high bows and sterns for riding out heavy seas.

The ships were manned by a fighting and sailing crew organised in a similar way to land counterparts. The sailing company comprised marines, *valarius* sailors and *remiges* oarsmen – professionals, not slaves. From the outset, the mix of men was cosmopolitan, reflecting the empire itself. The original fleet used in the Claudian invasion was built around a core of experienced men from the *Classis Misinensis* regional fleet in Italy; later, most of its sailors and shipbuilders came from various European tribes – including the latterly rebellious Batavi.

During the Claudian invasion of AD 43, 900 ships were constructed to carry Aulus Plautius's invasion force of 40,000 legionaries and auxiliaries in three waves across the English Channel. The fleet then supported the spearheads during the breakout from the invasion beaches of eastern Kent. It remained prominent in the final defeat of the Catuvellauni (who led the British resistance), and carried Claudius himself across from Gaul to take credit for the successful campaign.

The regional fleet then played a key role in the various conquest campaigns, an example being Vespasian and his *Legio II Augusta* (Augustus's Second Legion) in south-west Britain during the late AD 40s. The *Classis Britannica* provided support during the future emperor's relentless advance, providing the vital transport capability that enabled the land forces to leap ahead, objective by objective. After four seasons of campaigning, the south-west was fully conquered and the fleet, based in a series of new fortified harbours, was begin-



A mosaic from Ravenna shows three Roman galleys. The Classis Britannica largely comprised *liburnae* – light, manoeuvrable bireme war galleys



ning to forge up into the Bristol Channel.

By the mid-AD 70s, the province was effectively established along lines recognisable for the rest of the occupation, with south and east fully functioning as part of the empire, and the north and west being a militarised border territory. With the northern border set along a line between the Solway Firth and the Tyne, later to be fortified under Hadrian, the scene was set for the *Classis Britannica* to again play a major campaigning role, this time under governor Gnaeus Julius Agricola, who made ambitious attempts to conquer Scotland.

Agricola arrived in Britain in AD 77 and, after a brief campaign in Wales, turned his attention northward. His targets were the native tribes of Scotland, broadly referred to as the Caledonians, and in the spring of AD 79 he launched his forces in that direction. This campaign featured the familiar pattern of coastal legionary spearheads on both the east and west coasts supported by the *Classis Britannica*, which controlled the sea close to the shore and fulfilled the supply and scouting roles.

The presence of the fleet was evidently a shock to the natives: in his *Agricola*, Tacitus

reports that its galleys spread terror among the Caledonians. Agricola mounted four subsequent campaigns in the north, building military anchorages on the east and west coasts of Scotland and far north-west England to support the fleet. The fighting included a successful amphibious assault either north across the Solway Firth from Cumbria or west across the river Annan in Dumfries and Galloway, and in the fifth year of his campaign Agricola brought the natives to battle at Mons Graupius below the Moray Firth in the Grampians. The result: the total defeat of the Caledonians. The *Classis Britannica* then completed the first Roman circumnavigation of Britain.

Agricola was recalled to Rome some time before AD 85, after which the empire lost interest in the far north of Britain. The *Classis Britannica* spent much of the second century supporting the military presence on the northern border. It came to prominence again in AD 196 when the British governor Clodius Albinus launched an unsuccessful usurpation attempt against the emperor Septimius Severus. It appears that the *Classis Britannica* sided with Albinus – the fleet would have been

needed to carry his troops to the continent – and so fell from imperial favour.

However, the fleet made a spectacular return to action in the early third century, when Severus attempted his own ‘shock and awe’ conquest of Scotland. At this time the Maeatae in central Scotland and Caledonians farther north had become so troublesome that the governor made a desperate request for new troops or for the emperor himself. He was lucky: he got both.

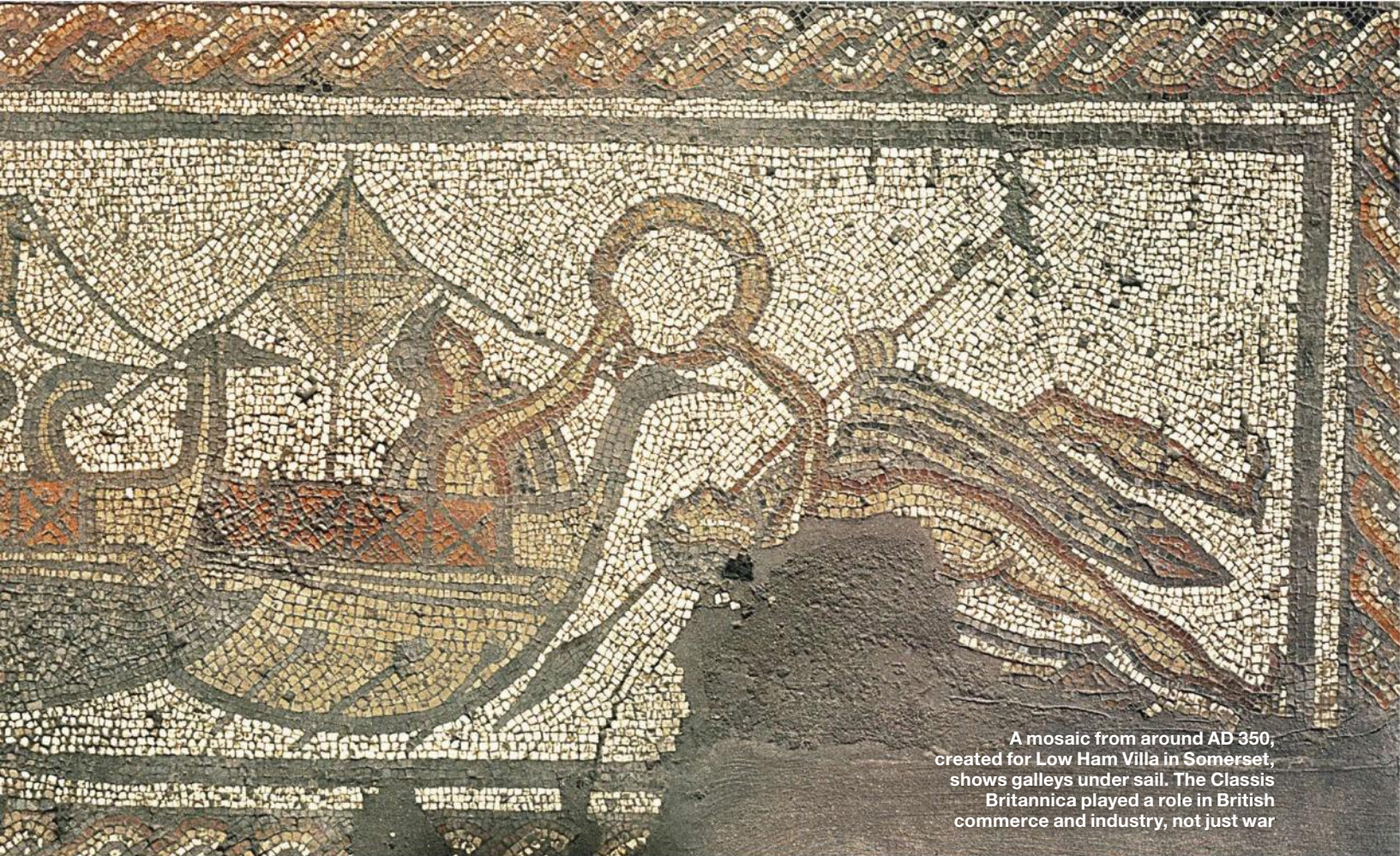
Imperial assault

In AD 208, Severus crossed the Channel with a huge imperial entourage including the Praetorian Guard and crack units from the continental legions. Carried by the *Classis Britannica*, this force landed at Richborough (near Sandwich in Kent), travelling north and collecting British legions en route to York, where Severus set up his imperial capital.

The emperor launched the first of two massive assaults northward in AD 209, deploying 50,000 men and massively expanding the fort and harbour at South Shields to act as his main supply base. As this enormous force headed north, the *Classis Britannica* again sat tight on the maritime flank, its galleys and transports surging ahead of the land forces to harry the natives and secure assault harbours. The regional fleet’s importance in this campaign is indicated by the number of coins featuring a naval theme issued at this time.

Once again, as the legionary spearheads

THE FLEET MADE A SPECTACULAR RETURN TO ACTION IN THE THIRD CENTURY WHEN SEVERUS ATTEMPTED A ‘SHOCK AND AWE’ CONQUEST OF SCOTLAND



A mosaic from around AD 350, created for Low Ham Villa in Somerset, shows galleys under sail. The Classis Britannica played a role in British commerce and industry, not just war



A tile stamped with the mark of the Classis Britannica, discovered near Canterbury. Such finds help establish the presence of the navy at sites along the English Channel

probed northwards, fortified harbours at Cramond on the Forth and Carpow on the Tay were used. The campaign progressed steadily, though it is clear that the stream of casualties from guerilla warfare began to mitigate against Roman success. When it became obvious that the natives wouldn't oblige with a meeting engagement, a truce was agreed and the emperor headed back to York with terms that met his satisfaction.

The terms clearly weren't so agreeable to the natives, who revolted the following year, prompting Severus to plan a new campaign. Ill health got the better of him, and the advance was led by his son, Caracalla. This campaign, undertaken in AD 210, was especially brutal: Severus ordered his troops to kill all of the locals they encountered. Though the campaign again concluded without a major battle, it was ultimately successful in that peace fell on the northern border for a period of 80 years.

The navy vanishes

The campaigns of Severus marked a high point in the career of the Classis Britannica – though he himself died in York in AD 211. The fleet then found itself combatting a new menace in the form of Germanic maritime raiders travelling across the North Sea.

The fleet disappears from the historical record in the middle of the third century, but its fate is a mystery. A number of events offer explanations; in each case the fleet was vulnerable, at some stage backing the wrong

horse during the sometimes violent and dramatic changes in imperial leadership, and suffering as a result. One was the scramble for imperial control between senate and military after the assassination of Alexander Severus in AD 235, which initiated the 'Crisis of the Third Century'. Another was the 'Gallic Empire' founded by Postumus that lasted from AD 260 to AD 274. Finally, there was the 'North Sea Empire' established by the usurper Carausius, which lasted from AD 286 to AD 296.

In my opinion, the most likely of these scenarios would have been in the context of the 'Gallic Empire', by which time it might also have been the case that the fleet was simply too expensive to maintain given the economic troubles of the empire.

However it came about, we know that sometime in the middle of the third century Britain's first navy disappeared – the end of a major fighting force that played a vital role in the story of Roman Britain. **II**

Simon Elliott is a historian and archaeologist, author of *Sea Eagles of Empire* (History Press, 2016)

DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

► **The Roman Navy: Ships, Men & Warfare 350 BC – AD 475** by Michael Paul Pitassi (Seaforth, 2012)

Roman Britain and the Roman Navy by David JP Mason (History Press, 2009)

BRITAN

WELCOME TO BRITANNIA

An in-depth guide to the Roman province

WHAT HAPPENED TO BRITAIN'S LOST ROMAN LEGION?

Investigate the mysterious fate of the Ninth

ROME VS SCOTLAND

Imperial efforts to conquer northern Britain

THE FIRST BRITISH EMPIRE

The usurper emperor Carausius

EXTRAVAGANCE IN ROMAN BRITAIN

Luxurious lifestyles of the Roman elite

NIA

WELCOME TO BRITANNIA

Bronwen Riley takes the pulse of Roman Britain in AD 130 and finds that, 80 years after the conquest, tensions are still simmering – especially in the borderland around Hadrian's Wall



Britannia lay at the north-westernmost edge of an empire so vast that it encompassed “the ocean where the sun god rises to the place where he sinks”. Though it had been an imperial province for more than 80 years – ever since the emperor Claudius, accompanied by elephants, claimed it for Rome – in AD 130 Britannia remained a by-word for a remote land with a distant people.

For anyone making the perilous journey to Britannia’s shores, expectations were, as far as we can tell, low. The natives were considered

to be uncultured and generally unpromising, though their plain clothes were made with most excellent quality wool and their hunting hounds were deemed to be effective, if unprepossessing in looks. The climate, too, left much to be desired. Here was a place where the rain fell, the sun was seldom seen, and a thick mist was said to rise from the marshes “so that the atmosphere in the country is always gloomy”.

Although the crossing from Gesoriacum (Boulogne) to Rutupiae (Richborough in Kent) was comparatively short, somewhere between six and eight hours, the symbolic distance was immense. For to set foot on

Hadrian’s Wall bisects the countryside of northern England. By AD 130, the wall’s turf sections were being rebuilt in stone and many adaptations were being carried out – a sure sign that trouble was afoot

a ship bound for Britannia was to venture into *Oceanus*, that immeasurable expanse of sea, full of monsters and perilous tides that led to a land of unfathomable people.

By AD 130 the tentacles of Roman administration had reached via the army into the farthest corners of the province, and the island had been scrupulously measured and recorded – at least in terms of potential revenue. Yet Britannia represented the untamed and unknown.

Tattooed bodies

Censuses may have been carried out for tax purposes, records made of landholdings, distances measured between places, roads built to Roman standards, and all rivers and crossing points marked down, but none of this meant that the Romans felt any more sympathetic towards the island's inhabitants. The Britons were regarded as somewhat uncouth, their bodies tattooed with patterns and pictures of all kinds of animals.

Serving officers on Hadrian's Wall, who disparagingly referred to Britons as *Brittunculi* or 'Britlings', clearly had not progressed very much in their outlook since the days of Cicero who, when writing about his brother on campaign in Britain during Julius Caesar's expedition to the island in 54 BC, joked that none of the British were expected to be accomplished in literature or music. The stereotype persisted into the

THE BRITONS WERE REGARDED AS SOMEWHAT UNCOUTH, THEIR BODIES TATTOOED WITH PATTERNS AND PICTURES OF ALL KINDS OF ANIMALS

fourth century, when poets were still portraying the person of Britannia with cheeks tattooed, "clothed in the skin of some Caledonian beast".

By AD 130, many provincials from elsewhere in the empire had made it to the top of Roman society (two successive emperors, Trajan and Hadrian, hailed from Spanish families, the Ulpii and the Aelii), while the Gauls were making vast fortunes in trade, and clawing their way into the senate. There is no record of any Britons doing the same during this period, though many were serving as auxiliary soldiers in far-flung places, such as the cohort of Britons then in Dacia (modern Romania).

British exports tended to be rather unglamorous: tin, lead, hides and slaves. If

asked what British products they had bought recently, shoppers on the streets of Rome might have been pushed for an answer. Blankets or rush baskets, perhaps? That said, anyone keen on hunting may have known of – or even possessed – one of the famously ugly but skilful British hounds, and the gourmets among them tasted oysters shipped in from Kent.

However, visitors arriving in Britannia may have had to adjust their preconceptions. By AD 130 the main towns and cities of Britain conformed more or less to a Roman model, albeit with some idiosyncratic flourishes. Though houses in both town and country were generally modest in size – the age of great villa-building in Britain was still to come – the province boasted some magnificent civic architecture.

The gateway to Britannia was the port of Rutupiae on the Kent coast, where passengers alighting on the British shore were greeted by a monumental arch in gleaming Italian marble, one of the largest in the empire. The legionary baths at Isca Augusta (Caerleon) also rivalled those anywhere else, while the brand-new basilica in the forum at Londinium was the largest north of the Alps. These buildings were all state-sponsored – the British aristocracy did not indulge in the sort of competitive public munificence displayed elsewhere.

In Britannia, Londinium led the way in terms of wealth and fashion, and even modest shops and workshops in the city were being enhanced by reception rooms with painted walls and cement floors. Though the precise civic status of the city in AD 130 is unknown, this was the province's undoubted epicentre – the place where all major roads originated or through which they passed. It was the seat of the provincial governor and the imperial procurator, whose job it was to oversee the collection of revenues on behalf of the *Fiscus* (the emperor's personal treasury).

Trouble ahead

In AD 130, Britannia was an imperial province, which meant that its new governor, Sextus Julius Severus, ruled it on the emperor's behalf, taking his orders and instructions straight from Hadrian and corresponding directly with him while abroad. Severus, who came from Dalmatia but completed his education in Rome, was said to be one of Hadrian's best generals and had also proved himself an able administrator. The fact that he had been sent to Britannia at this point may indicate that there was serious trouble there and that Hadrian planned for him either to fight a war or to carry out a major reorganisation of the province.

IN CONTEXT

THE ROMAN EMPIRE IN AD 130

In AD 130 **Publius Aelius Hadrianus**, a complex and energetic man, had been emperor for 14 years. Like his role model, the emperor Augustus, Hadrian adopted a policy of consolidation, defining the boundaries of empire – of which **Hadrian's Wall** in Britannia was the most dramatic expression. The wall was begun at his instigation during a visit to the province in AD 122, following a serious war in the north. In AD 130, Hadrian was also attempting to **raise standards of morality and discipline in public life**, and was keenly aware of the power of architecture in projecting a political message.

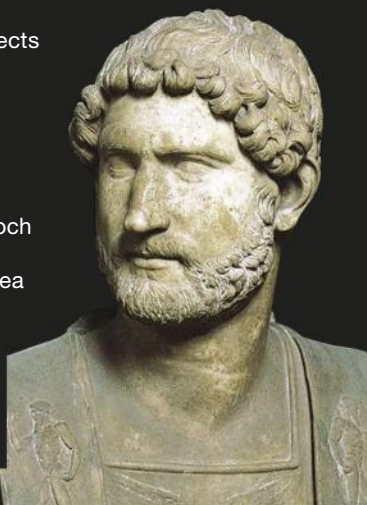
By that year, Hadrian's magnificent 900-room palace at **Tivoli** was all but

completed, as was the newly rebuilt **Pantheon** in Rome, its massive concrete dome an astonishing feat of engineering. Though Rome was still the centre of imperial power, Hadrian was careful **not to neglect the provinces** and he supported building projects wherever he visited.

Hadrian travelled a great deal. He was particularly attached to Greece, where he spent much of AD 129. That winter he stayed in Antioch before visiting Palmyra (Syria), Arabia and Judaea the following spring,

arriving in Egypt in summer AD 130 **with his wife Vibia Sabina.** He was also **accompanied by his male lover, Antinous**, who drowned in the river Nile in October, causing the emperor intense grief.

Hadrian was determined to raise standards of morality



RULED BRITANNIA

Nine nerve centres of Roman Britain in AD 130

1 Rutupiae

(Richborough, Kent)

The port where Claudius landed to launch his invasion in AD 43 was still the province's key point of entry. Glistening in Italian marble and adorned with bronzes and sculpture, a gigantic monumental arch represented the *accessus Britanniae*: the symbolic gateway to Britannia. Aligned with Watling Street, Rutupiae was connected with the network of roads criss-crossing the whole province.



This lighthouse guided ships into the harbour at Dover

2 Dubris (Dover, Kent)

This port was the British base of the Classis Britannia (British fleet). Ships were guided into the harbour at the narrow mouth of the river Dour by two lighthouses, one on each of the headlands of the chalk cliffs. Their fire beacons were visible far out to sea – even, on a clear day, from as far as Gaul.

3 Londinium (London)

Britannia's most important city attracted international trade and a cosmopolitan population. On the boundary of several ancient kingdoms, the city held a pivotal position at the head of a tidal river and at the intersection of key routes into the heart of the province. The provincial governor and procurator were based here.



The remains of the 6,000-seat amphitheatre at Caerleon

4 Isca Augusta

(Caerleon, Gwent)

The fortress at the headquarters of the *legio II Augusta* (Augustus's Second Legion) occupied a 20-hectare site on the right bank of the Usk, at the river's lowest bridging point before it enters the Severn estuary. It boasted a superb baths complex, 41-metre-long open-air pool and 6,000-seater amphitheatre. Most legionaries, though, were now stationed farther north, deployed on the wall.

5 Calleva Atrebatum

(Silchester, Hampshire)

First settled by an exiled Gallic chief, Calleva was the administrative centre of the Atrebates and the first major town west of London. Standing in an open landscape of pasture, hay meadows and heathland, it lay at the junction of main roads leading to other significant towns in all directions.

6 Viroconium Cornoviorum

(Wroxeter, Shropshire)

Capital of the cattle-rearing Cornovii, this town's new forum and basilica were possibly instigated by Hadrian's visit to Britain in AD 122 and completed and dedicated in AD 130. At this time, plans for baths with a leisure hall were yet to get off the ground.



This coin shows Hadrian inspecting his troops in Britain



The remains of Banna (Birdoswald), one of the forts that guarded Hadrian's Wall



Tourists flocked to Bath's famed waters in the second century AD

7 Aquae Sulis (Bath)

This was Britannia's premiere tourist attraction. The thermal waters were hugely popular, attracting many soldiers on leave and visitors from far and wide. The steaming spring sat in a precinct with classical temple and adjoining baths dedicated to Sulis Minerva – Sulis being a Celtic deity who was combined with the Roman goddess Minerva.

8 Banna

(Birdoswald, Cumbria)

In AD 130, big changes were afoot at this fort, which sat astride Hadrian's Wall high on top of an escarpment with magnificent views to the south over the river valley and Cold Fell. The old timber fort was about to be replaced by a large stone one with a rare *basilica exercitatoria*, or indoor drill hall.

9 Fanum Cocidi [?]

(Bewcastle, Cumbria)

Six miles north of Banna, this outpost fort – which may have been called Fanum Cocidi – was manned by a cohort of Dacians (from modern Romania). Their job was to patrol the troubled no man's land north of the wall.

WHEN IN LONDINIUM...

Discover daily life for Roman Britons in AD 130 – from sleeping with hounds to gambling away wages



Two men carry a wild boar in an AD 300 mosaic. Hunting was a favourite pastime of Roman army officers

The thrill of the chase

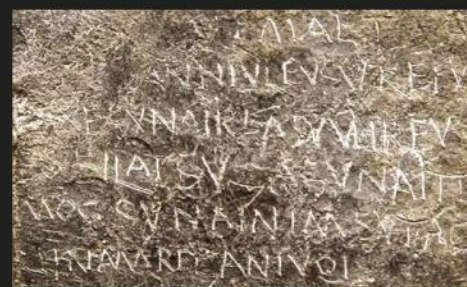
At Hadrian's Wall, hunting was the officers' most eagerly anticipated pastime. They wrote to each other about their hounds, and sent their friends requests for kit: "If you love me, brother, I ask that you send me hunting-nets," wrote Flavius Cerialis from Vindolanda to his fellow officer Brocchus in the early second century.

Hunting hounds were well looked after. A contemporary writer recommended that they were fondled after a good chase, and given a soft warm bed at night where, he advised: "It is best when they sleep with a man so that they become more affectionate and appreciate companionship."

No-frills fashion

Anyone coming from the Mediterranean, and especially from places like Egypt and Syria, would have been struck by the plainness of British clothes. Although cloth was dyed – red with imported madder or bedstraw, purple with local lichens, blue with woad, yellow with weld – there were none of the fancy weaves or brocades that could be found farther east.

In these damp islands people sported eminently sensible – and excellent quality – medium-weight diamond, herringbone and plain 2/2 twill. Though there were those who wore imported damask silks, diamond twill and checks were *the* distinctively north-west European Celtic look.



Britons used curse tablets such as this to beseech the gods to punish their enemies

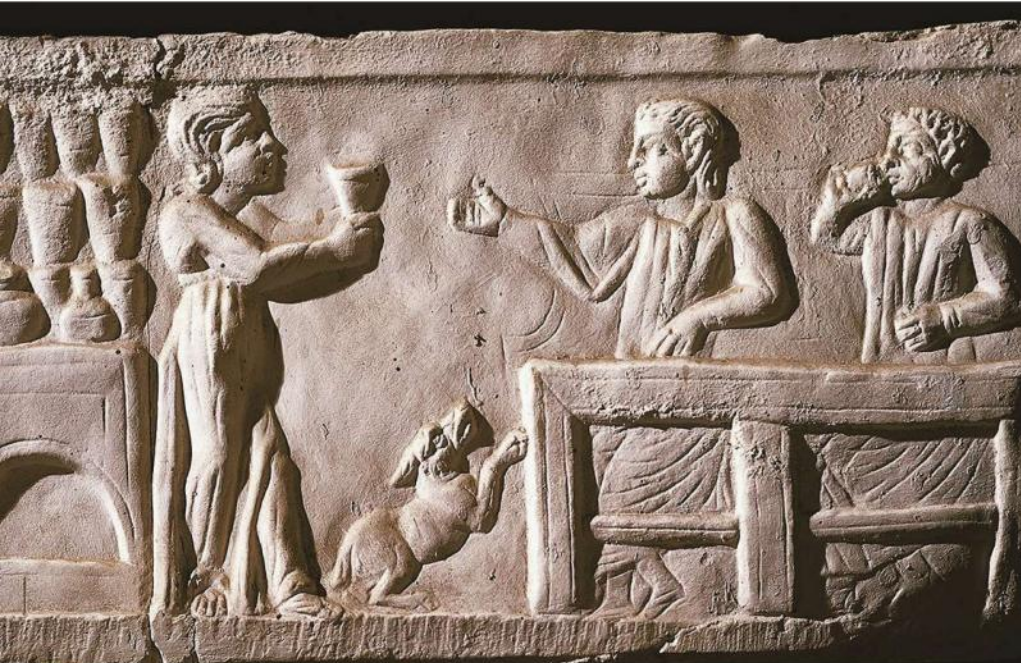
A curse be upon you

"Lady Nemesis, I give thee a cloak and a pair of Gallic sandals; let him who took them not redeem them (unless) with his own blood." This curse, written in Latin on a lead tablet in Wales, was typical of hundreds found in Britain. The British did not curse rival lovers as elsewhere in the empire but instead were obsessed with theft and property rights.

Nemesis was a goddess who could distribute both good and bad fortune, success or failure, even life and death. She is often associated with amphitheatres; the Welsh curse quoted above was found at the amphitheatre at Caerleon.

Diamond and herringbone twill were all the rage among the Celts of north-west Europe





The patrons of a tavern enjoy a drink in this second-century AD relief

Beer, dice and knife attacks

Italian and Greek wine was available, but most wine in Britain came from Gaul, imported in wooden barrels. Soldiers of the ranks enjoyed beer and snacked on shellfish in the taverns while playing games such as *ludus duodecimo scriptorium*, which was a bit like backgammon but played with dice.

Taverns were louche places where barmaids were notorious for offering more than just drinks. Buried under the clay floor in the back room of an inn at Vercovicium (Housesteads) on Hadrian's Wall are the carefully concealed bodies of a woman and a man – the latter with the tip of the knife that killed him still wedged between his ribs.



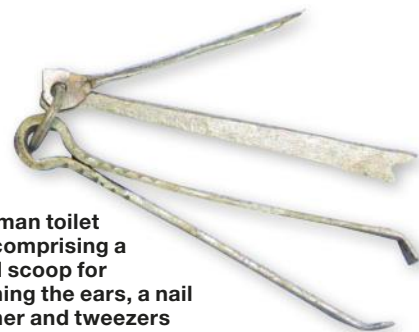
On a roll: men play dice in a third-century AD mosaic

Blood sports

Alongside the crocodiles, lions and antelopes shipped to Rome to appear in the arena were bears and stags from Britain and wolfhounds from Ireland. The logistics of capturing the animals and transporting them overseas were considerable, and many died en route or arrived in a miserable condition.

There is no record of imported animals appearing in the amphitheatres of Britain, but there is evidence for wolves (in Wales), bulls and bears. Travelling schools of gladiators, sponsored by the state, appeared in Britain while on tour through Gaul, Spain and Germany.

A deer depicted in a second-century Roman mosaic. Live stags were shipped from Britain to Rome to appear in the arena



A Roman toilet set, comprising a small scoop for cleaning the ears, a nail cleaner and tweezers

TRAVELLERS MAY HAVE NOTICED BRITONS' LOVE OF PERSONAL GROOMING SETS, COMPLETE WITH SCOOPS FOR CLEANING OUT THEIR EARS

A large number of soldiers were garrisoned in Britannia, and its governorship was one of the two most senior posts available. Though no one visited Britannia for the culture, doing a stint in a tough place such as this could do no harm to a military or political career.

Many who came to Britannia as governors, procurators and commanding officers were able and affluent men who went on to enjoy remarkable careers. Lucius Minicius Natalis, a slick and wealthy Spaniard, arrived here at about this time. Fresh from winning a four-horse chariot race at the Olympic Games in AD 129, he took up the command of the *legio VI Victrix* based in Eboracum (York). Senior cavalry officer Marcus Maenius Agrippa from Camerinum in the Italian Marches, who was personally known to Julius Severus and Hadrian, was shortly to assume command of the *Classis Britannia*, the British fleet. This was one of the most important of all provincial fleets, with bases at Gesoriacum (Boulogne) and Dubris (Dover), in addition to several presumed outposts around the British coast; read more about this fleet on page 38. Agrippa would excel at his new job, later being made procurator of the province.

These newcomers to Britannia would have expected to communicate in Latin but would have needed to get used to the peculiarities of the British accent. Though upper-class Brits spoke very correct, textbook Latin “better than the Gauls”, some of their vowel sounds were rather affected.

British Latin also developed its own insular peculiarities such as the use of the word *hospitium* to mean house or home, which ultimately derived from the word for an inn



Roman soldiers load barrels onto ships on the Danube in a scene from Trajan's Column. By AD 130, Britons could obtain luxury goods from across Europe

or lodging. Their native tongue was Brittonic, a Celtic language similar to those spoken in Gaul. After the Romans arrived, the British adopted many Latin words into their vocabulary to describe aspects of daily life for which there was no existing equivalent.

Strolling around the streets, the newcomer to AD 130 Britannia would have heard many other languages – including Gaulish, Greek and Palmyrene – spoken by the thousands of foreign soldiers, slaves and traders now based here. Observant travellers would have noticed everywhere small signs that they were somewhere far from home. They may have remarked upon how keen the British were on cleaning their nails, and how attached they were to personal grooming sets, which included scoops for cleaning out their ears.

Finest fish sauce

Excellent supply networks meant that in all parts of the province people could obtain imported food and drink such as Spanish olive oil, Gallic wine and Lucius Tettius Africanus's "finest fish sauce from Antibes". Men such as Tiberinius Celerianus, a merchant shipper from Gaul, clearly felt so at home here that he declared himself boldly to be *Londoniensium primus* – 'first of the Londoners' – on an altar he dedicated at Southwark.

Outside Londinium, one of the most cosmopolitan places in the country was Hadrian's Wall, base for thousands of Roman troops. Tensions here ran deep. Hostility simmered within and without the borders imposed by the Romans, among the unconquered tribes of Caledonia, among disaffected and uprooted peoples who had moved further north – and among those within the frontier zone itself.

The wall had hacked a brutal and in many ways unimaginative course across the country – one that severed Britons' ancestral

EXCELLENT SUPPLY NETWORKS MEANT THAT PEOPLE COULD OBTAIN IMPORTED FOOD AND DRINK IN ALL PARTS OF THE PROVINCE

homes in two. Those living north of the frontier would have suddenly found their access to lands or family or markets to the south of it severely restricted.

Not only were the soldiers and their military installations all too visible in the landscape, but the taxes required to pay for the troops' upkeep were now being extracted from people whose land had been confiscated to accommodate the garrisons.

If crack soldier and troubleshooter Julius Severus had to be sent out to Britannia in response to recent serious unrest, then it almost certainly took place up here. The rebuilding of the turf section in stone, and construction of new forts on and around the frontier at this period, suggest that the situation was tense and unpredictable.

Roman soldiers could be heavy-handed, and many Britons would have felt the force of a centurion's hobnailed boot. A letter of complaint from Vindolanda survives, in which the outraged scribe writes that he, an innocent man from overseas, had been flogged by centurions savagely enough to draw blood – the inference being that if he were a native Briton, it would have been a different matter.

In Cumbria, at the wall's western end, people continued to live in traditional roundhouse enclosures into the fourth

century. Some people in the wall's eastern sector, however, seemed to have succumbed to the blandishments of Roman life, or at least just decided to make the best of it.

By AD 130, villas and settlements similar to those of small towns in the south had begun to appear in the wall's environs. Some provincials seem to have adopted an idiosyncratic 'pick and mix' attitude to Roman culture. Down at Faverdale (now in County Durham), some 25 miles south of the wall, one family group continued to live in a roundhouse but had adapted Roman methods of stock-rearing, producing bigger specimens of cattle, sheep and pigs. They had acquired an impressive number of imported Samian ware drinking vessels, while continuing to use handmade pottery of an Iron Age form. They maintained ancient rituals such as the careful burial of broken quernstones, but had acquired new ones, including a miniature bathhouse, startlingly painted in red, white, green, yellow, orange, black and pink.

Though it contained two heated rooms and a waterproof (*opus signinum*) floor, this bathhouse may have struck a visitor used to traditional baths as a little odd: there was no sort of pool or basin. Instead, the occupants seemed to have enjoyed intimate shellfish sauna parties, during which the six people who could comfortably fit into this space snacked on cockles, mussels and oysters as they soaked up the heat. Welcome to Britannia, cAD 130. **H**

Bronwen Riley is a historian and author who is series editor of the English Heritage *Red Guides*

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BOOK

► **Journey to Britannia** by Bronwen Riley (Head of Zeus, June 2015)



HiSTORY
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EVENTS

Victorians Day

Saturday 25 February 2017, 10am–5.30pm

Venue: M Shed, Princes Wharf, Bristol BS1 4RN

With Saul David, Kathryn Hughes, Jerry White, Frank Trentmann and Jane Ridley

Delve into the fascinating stories of Victorian Britain and discover the life of the monarch who gave this era its name. This event includes a buffet lunch and regular teas and coffees

"Famous Victorians and their Unruly Body Parts"
Kathryn Hughes

"The Debtors' Prison in Victorian London: Fact and Fiction"
Jerry White

"The Light Brigade: Who Blundered?"
Saul David

"Private Comfort, Public Spirit: Victorian Consumer Culture in a Global Context"
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"Blitzkrieg, France 1940: Man, Machine and Myth"
Lloyd Clark

"The Holocaust: Meeting Those who were There"
Laurence Rees

"Fighting Different Wars: Britain's Many Different Second World Wars and Why They Matter"
Daniel Todman

"What were They Fighting for? German Mentalities in World War Two"
Nicholas Stargardt

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A second-century AD relief showing Roman troops. Historians concur that the Ninth Legion was annihilated – but they can't agree where the men met their end

MYSTERY OF THE NINTH

WHAT HAPPENED TO BRITAIN'S LOST ROMAN LEGION?

Rosemary Sutcliff's book *The Eagle of the Ninth* and the blockbuster film suggest that the lost legion met a bloody fate in Scotland. **Miles Russell** asks what really befell the Ninth

Hacking their way through the main body of frenzied attackers, the front line of the Roman Ninth Legion realised too late that they were completely surrounded. From all sides swarmed the barbarian host: a seething mass of unending savagery. Seeing the danger, the officers attempted to hold the line so that the bulk of the troops could fall back in some degree of order, but it was already too late. With all hope of escape denied to them, the last survivors were butchered where they stood and their eagle standard taken.

This is an undeniably dramatic – though also entirely fictional – depiction of the slaughter of an entire Roman legion. It's fictional because we don't actually know what happened to the 5,000 men of the Ninth, though the popular modern view is that they were annihilated at the edge of the empire, somewhere in the remote Highlands of northern Britain, in the early years of the second century AD.

The Ninth was an elite Roman military unit that had been operating in Britain following the invasion of AD 43. This legion was instrumental in combating native resistance in northern England, and had been in the front line during the revolt of Queen Boudica in AD 60, in which it had suffered heavy losses. In the early AD 70s the legion pushed forward to a new base at York and, 10 years later, was actively campaigning across the Highlands of Scotland. By AD 100 it was back in northern England but by the early 120s it had vanished, its place at York being taken by another legion, the Sixth.

What ultimately happened to the Ninth is one of those great unknowns of history, and its disappearance has become one of the more potent myths surrounding Roman Britain. Five years ago interest in the mystery was sparked afresh with the release of a Hollywood blockbuster movie, *The Eagle*. A key plot device of the film is the annihilation of the Ninth (audiences apparently never tire of seeing Roman soldiers being cut down by hairy barbarians in picturesque Highland settings).

Elements of both the British and American press, however, were somewhat snippy about this, stating that the Ninth Legion did not die in a remote Scottish valley but was probably transferred to Judea, only to perish there in a catastrophic war. It shouldn't be British tribesmen shown killing Romans, they claim, but Persians or Jews. Why, then, is the popular-culture view of the Ninth's demise so out of step with the supposed historic reality?

Up until the 1950s, the 'mysterious



A bust of Emperor Hadrian. His intervention was needed to quell a British uprising in the second century AD

disappearance of the Ninth Legion' was not considered a mystery at all. Winston Churchill, in his *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* (published from 1956), observed that the unit had certainly disappeared "in combating an obscure rising of the tribes in northern Britain". Even if some academics disagreed, most conceded that the last confirmed sighting of the legion had been in northern Britain during the early years of the second century. By the AD 160s, when a list of all serving regiments was compiled, the Ninth had ceased to exist. Its ultimate fate, however, was not recorded.

What gave the 'lost in Britain' myth a huge boost was the publication in 1954 of the novel *The Eagle of the Ninth* by Rosemary Sutcliff, a hauntingly evocative account of life and loss in Britannia. The hero of this tale is Marcus Flavius Aquila, a young man trying to discover what happened to his father, chief centurion in the Ninth, who went missing when Marcus was a child. Journeying beyond Hadrian's Wall, Marcus learns the truth about how the Ninth was destroyed, and in doing so stumbles upon the legion's emblematic bronze eagle, now in enemy hands. His personal odyssey can end only with the rescue of the eagle and its safe return to Roman-held territory.

**WITH ALL HOPE OF
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The inspiration for Sutcliff's novel was a wingless bronze eagle found in the Roman town of Calleva (Silchester in Hampshire) during the later years of the 19th century. "Different people," Sutcliff noted in her preface, "have different ideas as to how it came to be there, but no one knows, just as no one knows what happened to the Ninth Legion."

The eagle was transformed by Sutcliff into the standard of the lost Ninth, its appearance at Silchester becoming the central mystery of the book. Once archaeologists realised that the metal bird had, in all certainty, originally accompanied a statue of the Roman god Jupiter, rather than representing the battered remnant of a lost legion, the mystery seemed resolved. There was no lost eagle and there was almost certainly no missing Ninth Legion.

The 'fact' that the Ninth was transferred out of Britain only to be butchered somewhere in the east has now become a solid, historical truth that can be used to ridicule those who don't know any better. Thus, today's press can kick at the central premise of movies such as *The Eagle* and *Centurion* (an earlier film with the same key plot device) with some degree of credibility. The trouble is there is nothing remotely secure about the idea that the Ninth ever left Britain, let alone that it was annihilated elsewhere.

Carved in stone

In fact, the final piece of solid evidence confirming the existence of the Ninth Legion comes from Britain, not the Middle East. This evidence was left for us at York, in the form of an immense stone inscription (pictured right) that recorded the completion of building work in the legionary fortress. The significance of the inscription lies in the fact that it lists a set of titles for the emperor Trajan that can be securely dated to the year AD 108.

In contrast, evidence for the theory of strategic transfer – the Ninth being taken out of Britain, rather than dying here – is rather flimsy. It comprises a series of fragmentary tiles, pottery sherds and a bronze pendant, all bearing the distinctive moniker of the Ninth, found at Nijmegen in the Netherlands. These artefacts, it has been suggested, represent the debris of a legion en route from Britannia early in the second century AD.

Given that the finds are limited, so the argument goes, the Ninth can't have remained here for long. Rather, they probably soon departed for the eastern frontier, where they were destroyed, possibly during the Second Jewish Revolt of AD 132–35.

This is a nice, straightforward theory that stretches the evidence beyond all credibility. None of the Nijmegen finds has been securely tied to a phase of occupation or fort-building.

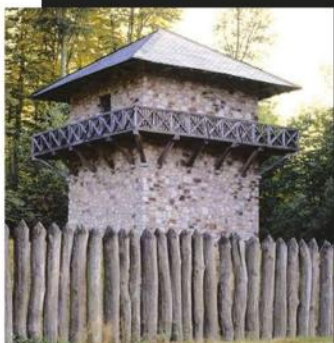
LEGION OF THE DAMNED



A tile manufactured by the Ninth Legion for use in their base at York

The Ninth Legion, led by Petillius Cerialis, is ambushed by the forces of the rebel Queen Boudica while hurrying to rescue the besieged Roman town of Colchester. The infantry are wiped out. Only the officers, including Cerialis himself, manage to escape with the cavalry.

Petillius Cerialis, previously general of the Ninth, returns to Britain as governor and leads a campaign against the Brigantes tribe of northern England. The Ninth Legion probably plays a major part in this, and it is likely that they are moved forward to a new base at York.



A reconstruction of a Roman watchtower in Hessen, Germany, home of the Chatti tribe

Part of the Ninth is moved from Britain to Germany to take part in the campaign against the troublesome Chatti tribe of Germany. Evidence of their placement on the Rhine probably dates to this time.



A sarcophagus from c190 AD depicting a battle between Roman and Germanic warriors

AD 43

The Roman army annexes southern Britain for the emperor Claudius. Eleven British kings are recorded as surrendering. Although not securely attested, the Ninth Legion may have taken part in these operations.

AD 60/1

AD 69

Part of the Ninth Legion fights in the civil war convulsing the Roman empire, supporting General Vespasian at the battle of Cremona in Italy as he pursues his campaign to be emperor.



A relief showing General Vespasian, whom the Ninth Legion supported at the battle of Cremona

AD 70-74

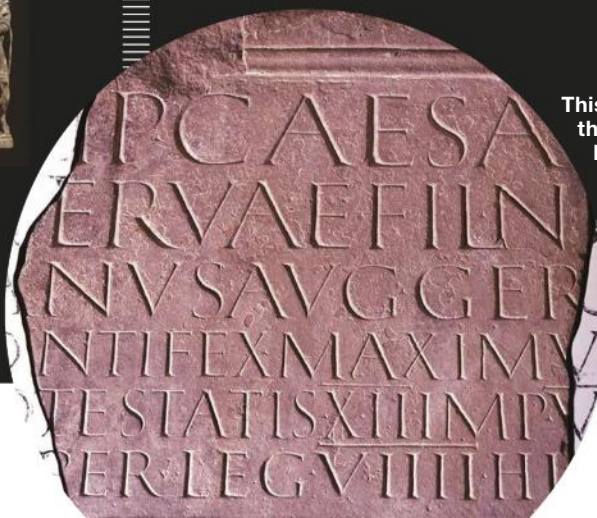
AD 83

AD 83-84

During the campaigns against the tribes of Caledonia (in what's now Scotland), the Ninth are targeted by Britons in a night attack on their fortress. The legion is saved only by the direct intervention of the governor, Agricola, and substantial reinforcements.

AD 107-8

The last record of the Ninth comes from a monumental inscription at York commemorating the rebuilding in stone of the fortress. By AD 122, their place at York has been taken by the Sixth Victrix Legion.



This engraving records the completion of building work at York's legionary fortress. It states that the work was carried out "by the agency of the Ninth Legion Hispana"

The tombstone of Gaius Saufeius, a soldier of the Ninth Legion, who died in Lincoln in the first century AD

BRITAIN WAS NEVER A SECURE PART OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE. IT WAS DANGEROUS AND UNPREDICTABLE

They certainly prove that the Ninth (or at least a part of it) was in the Netherlands – but, critically, not when.

We know from contemporary accounts that detachments of the Ninth were taken out of Britain by the emperor Domitian to fight the Chatti (a troublesome Germanic tribe) in AD 83, so the pieces plausibly derive from this particular military campaign. Nothing found at Nijmegen points to the legion being there in the second century, and there is certainly nothing that post-dates evidence recorded from Britain.

What, then, of the suggestion that the Ninth was destroyed somewhere at the eastern margins of the Roman empire? The trouble with this theory is that there is no record that the Ninth Legion was ever active in the east – no contemporary account, no tombstones, no pottery nor even a stamped brick or tile to support such an hypothesis. Yes, considerable numbers of Roman soldiers did indeed die on the eastern frontier at about the time the Ninth disappeared, but we can't say that any were from the Ninth itself.

We know about such troop losses because the historian Fronto, writing in the AD 160s, reminded the then emperor Marcus Aurelius of past tragedies: “Indeed, when your grandfather Hadrian held imperial power,” he said, “what great numbers of soldiers were killed by the Jews,” adding: “and what great numbers by the British.”

The Jewish wars are now well accounted for, but the number and extent of Roman losses in Britain are unknown. Fronto's reference must presumably relate to a significant event involving a catastrophic loss of legionary lives, otherwise he would surely not have mentioned it. Things were obviously bad in Britain during the early years of Hadrian's reign – but just how bad?

The ideal posting

Britain was never a secure part of the Roman empire. It was dangerous, volatile and thoroughly unpredictable – an ancient equivalent of modern Afghanistan, perhaps. It was also one of the most heavily militarised parts of the Roman world. For young Roman



men desperate to prove themselves in the arena of war, it proved to be the ideal posting.

For those seeking peace and security, however, Britain was a troublesome cultural backwater. At the time of Hadrian's accession in AD 117, we know that things weren't going at all well in the province. The anonymous author of the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* tells us that “The Britons could not be kept under Roman control.” Given the phrasing, it is likely that this lack of control involved a major uprising. The frontier zone of northern England is perhaps most likely to have formed the epicentre of discontent, though it is sobering to note that Roman London burned down at this time.

The ‘British problem’ was evidently acute. We know from inscriptions on a military tombstone dedicated to Titus Pontius Sabinus, from Ferentinum in Italy, that elements of the Seventh, Eighth and Twenty-Second legions, numbering more than 3,000 men, were sent on the “British Expedition” early in Hadrian's reign. This was a massive redeployment of military personnel and suggests that the provincial government required a significant reinforcement, presumably in order to suppress a major insurgency.

Hadrian himself visited the island in AD 122, in order, so the *Scriptores* tells us, to “correct many faults” and to build a wall “80 miles long, to separate the Romans and the barbarians”.



This relief from the Arch of Titus in Rome shows spoils from the sack of Jerusalem, AD 70. Was the Ninth annihilated in the Middle East early in the second century?

We are not told what the ‘faults’ were, but the building of the wall suggests that, having quelled the insurrection, Hadrian wanted to secure the northernmost limit of his empire in the most dramatic of ways.

The emperor also brought with him a new legion, the Sixth, who took up residence in York, the former fortress of the Ninth. Such a redeployment would suggest that the great losses of military personnel alluded to by Fronto had occurred within the unlucky Ninth.

In conclusion, by far the most plausible answer to the question: “what happened to the Ninth?” is that they fought and died in Britain, disappearing in the late 110s or early 120s, when the province was in disarray. Only the

direct intervention of the emperor Hadrian, together with a massive surge in troop numbers, could restore the province to order. By then, however, the Ninth had gone.

Savaged or annihilated, it seems that too few soldiers survived the troubles to allow the unit to be reformed. At least three survivors – serving in the legion no later than the early 120s – are known to us from their tombstones, yet no mass graves nor commemorative tombs have been found. However, there may well still be in northern Britain a small corner of a foreign field, as yet untouched by archaeology, that is forever Rome. The Ninth had disappeared from history, but their place in myth and popular culture was assured. **H**

Miles Russell is senior lecturer in prehistoric and Roman archaeology at Bournemouth University

DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

- **UnRoman Britain: Exposing the Great Myth of Britannia** by Miles Russell and Stuart Laycock (The History Press, 2010)
- **Bloodline: The Celtic Kings of Roman Britain** by Miles Russell (Amberley, 2010)
- **Roman Britain: A New History** by Guy de la Bédoyère (Thames and Hudson, 2006)
- **The Eagle of the Ninth** by Rosemary Sutcliff (Oxford University Press, 1954)

A mounted Roman soldier battles a 'barbarian' in a detail from the marble Amendola sarcophagus dating from the second or third century AD. Rome launched successive campaigns against the people of Scotland





ROME VS SCOTLAND

After the initial invasion of Britain, Rome quickly consolidated its hold on the south – but the north proved intractable. **Miles Russell** traces Rome's ill-conceived campaigns in Scotland

When Roman emperor Septimius Severus heard that the Caledonian tribes of Scotland's Highlands were in revolt, his solution was simple. "Let no one escape," he ranted at his subordinates, "not even the child carried in its mother's womb." Every settlement was to be burned, and every person killed. To end the British war successfully, Severus decided, Rome would have to commit genocide.

By spring AD 210, Severus had been engaged in a bitter war against the tribes of northern Britain for two years. Initially successful, with Roman troops launching a blitzkrieg assault from their base in York, the legions had quickly got bogged down in the swamps and lost in the forested uplands of Scotland. Here they were easy targets. "The Romans suffered great hardships," wrote contemporary historian Dio Cassius. "Any stragglers became a prey to ambush." With supply lines hampered and with no clear targets for the army to hit, the Roman advance faltered. "Unable to go on," wrote Dio Cassius, "they would be killed by their own men so they might not fall into enemy hands. As a result, as many as 50,000 died in all."

The body count claimed by Dio Cassius may be excessive – he was prone to exaggeration – but it is clear that Severus's campaign was a catastrophic miscalculation. Marching through unfamiliar and decidedly alien terrain, the legions were unable to deploy in order and could not use their training and discipline to good effect. Denied set-piece battles, and with no enemy fortresses or towns to attack, the Roman army succumbed to the inevitable. Locked into a mentality that made it impossible

to withdraw without admitting shameful defeat, Severus resorted to the final sanction. Everyone opposed to Rome – male or female, young or old – would have to die.

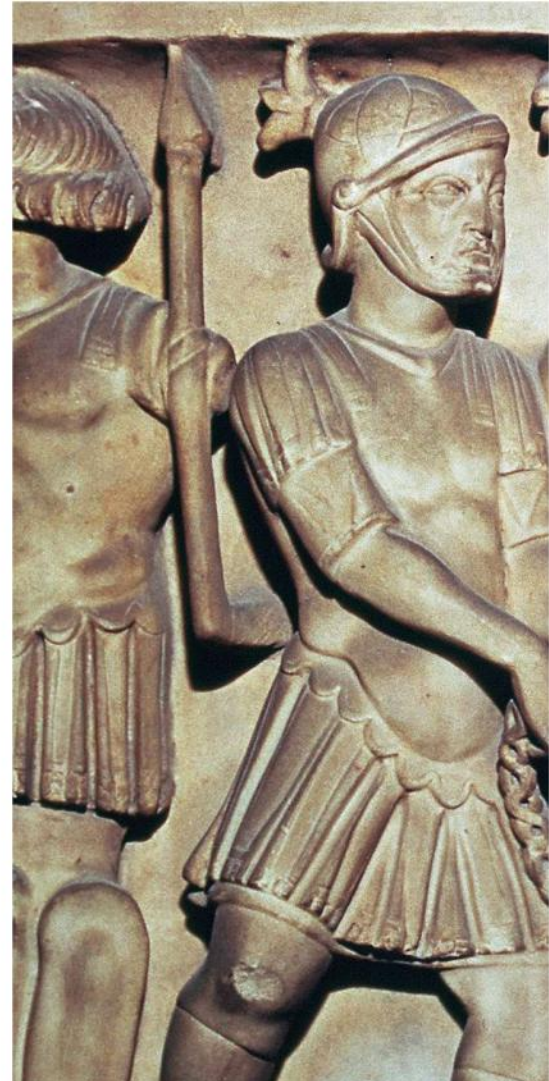
This was not the start of the bad relationship between the Roman state and the tribes of Scotland. Rome was a resource-hungry empire that required a constant supply of food for its urban and military population, metals (especially iron, lead, silver and gold) to feed the economy, and recruits for the army. It also needed a constant supply of slaves, and the best way to acquire these was through conquest. Britain, at the north-western edge of the known world, was a place of considerable economic potential – and Rome wanted it all.

A promising start

In AD 43 the emperor Claudius had swiftly annexed the agriculturally wealthy lands of southern and eastern England. Most of the tribes here viewed the Roman empire as a good thing, their leaders having been trading with the Mediterranean for years. The trouble was that Rome was not content with just the lowlands – it also desired the mineral-rich lands of Cornwall, Wales and the north.

As they moved out of south-eastern England, the Roman army encountered more hostile, mountainous terrain, more dispersed forms of settlement and a population that had experienced little or no contact with Mediterranean culture. Things swiftly became very difficult for the legions, who had no real experience of guerrilla war and found themselves fighting an enemy that refused to come out into the open and face them. Resorting to hit-and-run tactics, burning crops (thus depriving the Romans of food) and launching continual night attacks, the natives began to wear down the legions. For the first time since they arrived in Britain, the Romans started to lose large numbers of troops.

Scotland, it is fair to say, gave the Roman government a major headache. In AD 77 the mandate for total conquest was given to Agricola, the Roman governor of Britain, by the emperor Vespasian, who was keen to see the island's complete subjugation. In the space of seven years, Agricola managed to crush all resistance in north Wales and northern England before advancing his army along the eastern seaboard of Scotland by land and sea. The human cost of the war is not discussed by Roman writers, who provide a straightforward account of derring-do in the far north. The reality on the ground was a difficult advance through mountainous landscapes against

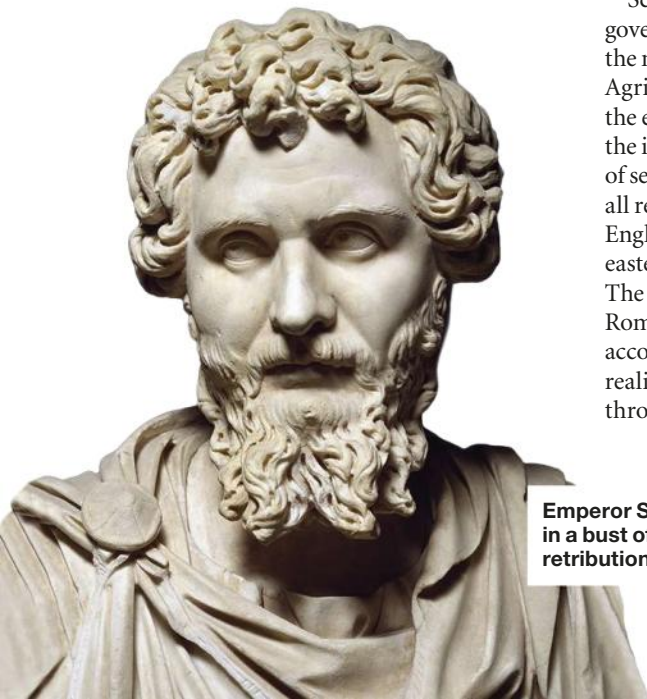


A marble sarcophagus frieze shows the aftermath of a clash between 'barbarians' and Roman soldiers. In Scotland, Roman troops were largely unable to engage their enemies in open battle

an enemy that possessed no large centres of population to besiege, no fixed resources to attack nor large field armies to fight.

Society in pre-Roman Scotland comprised a patchwork of tribes, each with their own outlook, identity and allegiances. The names of 17 such tribes have come down to us, thanks to Roman writers Ptolemy and Tacitus, who between them recorded the Boresti, Caereni, Caledonii, Carnonacae, Cornavii, Creones, Damnonii, Decantae, Epidii, Lugi, Novante, Selgovae, Smertae, Taexali, Vacomagi, Venicones and Votadini. Sadly, we don't know how these tribes worked or whether they represented discrete cultural or ethnic groups. It may be that the names were no more than those of ruling dynasties. A 'tribe' could simply have been those who owed allegiance to a specific king, not necessarily a distinctive people with its own language and customs.

The first northern British war ended, so Tacitus tells us, at the battle of Mons Graupius in AD 83. Although there is no record of precisely where in Scotland this was fought, Tacitus presents it as the final



Emperor Septimius Severus, depicted in a bust of c200 AD, ordered violent retribution against the people of Scotland



gasp of a beaten people. The British leader, a man called Calgacus, is recorded as giving an impassioned speech before the battle, about liberty and freedom from oppression – but because it was the Romans who recorded this, we don't know how much of it is true. Unfortunately for Calgacus, his army was roundly defeated. In the aftermath, we are told, the Romans saw nothing but “the silence of desolation, deserted hills, smoking houses in the distance; those sent out on reconnaissance met no one.” Confident that his victory had smashed all resistance, Agricola's fleet circumnavigated the northern coast while his troops began the construction of a series of permanent forts. Word was sent to Rome: all Britain was conquered.

Rome's tenuous grip

In truth, Rome's grip upon Scotland was tenuous. Yes, the tribes had been defeated in battle, but the communities in this part of the world were dispersed and difficult to monitor and control. New forts and roads all needed to be built and garrisons initiated before Scotland could effectively become a functioning part of

THE ROMAN LEGIONS FOUND THEMSELVES FIGHTING A GUERRILLA WAR AGAINST AN ENEMY THAT REFUSED TO COME OUT INTO THE OPEN AND FACE THEM

the Roman empire. The highlands possessed no centres of native population to urbanise, society was small-scale and decentralised, and there were no all-powerful kings or queens with whom the Roman state could do deals. Things also looked bad from an economic perspective. The Highlands were better suited to pasture than intensive crop production and, as far as Rome was concerned, there were no known mineral reserves to exploit. Winning the peace would require a large and permanent garrison and the creation of a whole new system of government.

As wars threatened Rome's frontiers elsewhere in the empire, troops were withdrawn from Scotland. Controlling this distant part of its realm was proving extremely costly in terms of manpower and resources, and some in Rome must have questioned the sense in maintaining an army here. Many of the new forts in Scotland were systematically demolished. At Inchtuthil, Tayside, a massive legionary fortress was methodically dismantled to stop anything useful falling into the hands of the enemy. Ramparts were levelled and the drains

RISE AND FALL OF HADRIAN'S WALL

The emperor's ambitious frontier was a monumental feat of building – but it relied on soldiers as well as stone to function

Hadrian's Wall represents the single greatest European building project ever undertaken; even after nearly 2,000 years it remains an impressive and awe-inspiring monument. Begun in AD 122, it took around seven years to complete, and ran for 73 miles (117.5km) from sea to sea between the Tyne estuary in the east and Bowness-on-Solway in Cumbria. Originally between 5 and 7 metres tall and 3 metres thick, the structure comprised 800,000 cubic metres of hand-carved stone.

Designed by the emperor Hadrian himself, this was no simple barrier. Rather, with its gates, earthworks, outlying early warning signal towers and system of fortlets continuing along the Cumbrian coast, this

was a complex system of control designed to maintain order along Rome's troublesome northern border. The wall had multiple gates, each set at a distance of one Roman mile (1.48km) from the next. Access through these gates was overseen by small garrisons housed in 'mile castles'. Between each mile castle were two turrets, providing a continuous line of sight and communication along the frontier. To begin with, large troop reserves were kept behind the wall as a strategic reserve. Before completion, however, soldiers were brought up onto the wall and housed in large forts. An extensive rampart system, the Vallum (still imposing today), was dug behind the wall to define the southernmost limit of the militarised zone.

The forts were occupied by auxiliaries, non-citizen soldiers recruited from newly

conquered territories around the empire. These included Dacians (from modern day Romania), Gauls (from France), Thracians (from Bulgaria), Tungrians (from Belgium), Syrians, Spaniards and even a detachment of specialist boatmen from the banks of the Tigris river in modern-day Iraq. Extensive civilian settlements, known as *vici*, evolved outside the forts. These provided a range of services for the garrison as well as housing the families of soldiers. By the later second century AD, many settlements had become successful, semi-autonomous communities supporting a wide and diverse mix of cultures and ethnicities.

Imposing as it was, Hadrian's Wall could not last forever. In the middle of the third century, Rome was brought to its knees by internal conflict, barbarian invasion and the combined effects of inflation, civil unrest, mass unem-



ployment and disease. Then in AD 367 the Caledonian tribes north of the wall joined forces with the tribes of Ireland and those from across the North Sea to inflict considerable damage to the Roman civil and military infrastructure. Britain was finally abandoned by the central Roman government in AD 410. By this time, much of the wall garrison had become little more than a citizen militia, protecting their own fields and livestock. Families were moved into the forts and the undefended *vici* were abandoned.

For much of the next 1,500 years the wall became little more than a quarry for those building farms, houses and field boundaries in the surrounding area. In the 18th century large stretches were taken for roadbuilding, especially for the 'Military Road' built in response to the Jacobite rebellion. It wasn't until the early 19th century that serious efforts were made to preserve the structure, first by John Clayton, who bought sections of the wall, and later by the National Trust and English Heritage. Today the wall is a World Heritage Site and a major tourist attraction.

GETTY



ABOVE: A second-century bust of the wall-building emperor Hadrian
BELOW: Original Roman latrines can still be seen at Housesteads fort on Hadrian's Wall



FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF IMPERIAL SPIN, EVERYTHING TO THE NORTH OF HADRIAN'S FRONTIER SYSTEM WAS 'BARBARIAN' AND COULD BE SAFELY IGNORED

blocked; all glass and pottery that could not be carried was pounded to dust; timbers were forced apart and more than a million iron nails were dumped into pits.

Following abandonment and withdrawal by Roman troops, Scotland seems to have been left largely to its own devices, the frontier of Rome stabilising along a line between Carlisle and Newcastle (the Tyne–Solway isthmus). The Roman empire may no longer have been interested in 'Caledonia', but the Caledonian tribes were becoming ever more intrigued by Rome. Roman-held territory was wealthy, and many entrepreneurs were developing large estates to the south of the frontier. Such towns and villas, filled with portable wealth, were easy targets for highly mobile raiding parties. By AD 122, northern tribes were causing such widespread disruption that the emperor Hadrian took a direct interest. His method for bringing peace and stability to the Roman-held part of Britain was to create a complex, monumental wall. From now on, at least from the perspective of imperial spin, everything to the south of this frontier system was 'Roman', whereas everything to the north was 'barbarian' and could be safely ignored.

The inferior wall

It was not, however, ignored for long. Desperate for a quick and relatively painless military victory, Hadrian's successor Antoninus Pius abandoned Hadrian's Wall in AD 139, moving troops into southern Scotland. Establishing a new frontier line between the Firth of Forth and the Firth of Clyde (areas later occupied by Edinburgh and Glasgow), this boundary has become known as the Antonine Wall. It was far less impressive than Hadrian's system, built of earth and timber rather than cut stone, and lasted for only a few decades before being abandoned by the next emperor, Marcus Aurelius, who decided it wasn't worth the financial outlay. Leaving Scotland for a second time, Rome reconsolidated its position back at the line of Hadrian's Wall.

Though undoubtedly impressive, all Hadrian's Wall really achieved was to ensure

Woad-painted men from Scotland around the time of the Roman occupation, as imagined in an illustration of 1815. The Roman term Pict, describing raiders from northern Scotland, means 'painted people'





The remains of *Iulia* near Falkirk. These stake-armed pits augmented the Antonine Wall that was built around AD 142 north of Hadrian's barrier

FAILING TO ATTAIN THE GLORY HE DESPERATELY SOUGHT, SEVERUS RESORTED TO REPRISAL, URGING HIS SOLDIERS TO KILL EVERYONE THEY ENCOUNTERED

that society on either side of the divide developed in very different ways. South of the wall, potential insurgents within Britannia had no hope of receiving support from allies in the north, and gradually became more 'Roman'. North of the wall, the presence of a large, intimidating garrison with unparalleled wealth beyond the barrier helped to galvanise the smaller tribes of Scotland, creating ever-more extensive confederacies who viewed the empire as a common foe. Increasingly, the Roman government sent military expeditions beyond the wall to 'pacify' or disperse these troublesome groups.

Unmitigated disaster

In AD 208, emperor Septimius Severus led an army to Britain, determined to sort out the British frontier once and for all. By this time, we are told, most of the smaller tribes had merged into two larger alliances, the Maeatae and the Caledones. Though tribal envoys initially arrived with offers of peace, Severus wanted a 'glorious' military resolution, so sent them back empty-handed. In retrospect, this

was a terrible mistake: the campaigns that followed proved an unmitigated disaster. "Once the army had crossed the rivers and earthworks on the frontier," the historian Herodian wrote, "there were frequent encounters and skirmishes with the enemy whose ability to disappear into the woods and marshes hampered the Romans and dragged out the war considerably."

The tribes employed tactics that denied Rome either a swift victory or a face-saving retreat. The farther Roman troops advanced into Scotland, the more stretched their lines of communication became, proving easy targets for a native army. Failing to attain the glory he desperately sought, Severus resorted to violent reprisal, urging his soldiers to kill everyone they encountered. In February 211, Severus died in York, crippled by illness and worn out by the war. After his funeral, the campaign was swiftly terminated and the troops taken home.

Official coins celebrated a triumph but in reality the war in Scotland had achieved very little. Hadrian's Wall was reinstated as the frontier, and Rome resorted to paying the

tribes to stay away – an early form of protection money.

Throughout the fourth and fifth centuries, as the Roman administration broke down, raiding parties from the north grew increasingly confident. At the same time as the Picts ('painted people') of the north were entering the Roman province, new ethnic groups – the Scots and Attacotti from Ireland and the Angles, Saxons and Jutes from across the North Sea – started to migrate into Britain.

Rome's failure to conquer Scotland meant that Britannia was always an outpost province – a heavily garrisoned territory with a wall dividing the Romanised south from the tribes of the north, who developed in their own distinctive way. From the Roman perspective, Britain was an exposed land, surrounded on three sides by wild barbarian tribes – but it would be these groups who had the ultimate say in the future development of Britain. **H**

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DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

► **The Legacy of Rome: Scotland's Roman Remains** by Lawrence Keppie (Birlinn, 2015)

► **Hadrian's Wall: History and Guide** by Guy de la Bédoyère (Amberley, 2010)

► **The Antonine Wall** by David Breeze (Birlinn, 2015)



A coin showing Carausius, a "brilliant tactician" who forged his own rebel 'British' empire in AD 286 and foiled a Roman navy's best efforts to dislodge him



THE FIRST BRITISH EMPIRE

In the third century AD, Britain was the epicentre of a massive rebellion that shook the Roman empire to its core. **Kevin Butcher** tells the story of Britannia's usurper emperors

Anyone with a scintilla of interest in Roman history knows the story. While the Roman empire was at its height, Britain was a murky, barbaric backwater – an insignificant, rain-soaked outpost shivering on the edge of the known world.

But in the late third century AD, at least, this well-worn cliché couldn't have been further from the truth. For in the 280s and 290s two men – the brilliant tactician Carausius and his ruthless successor, Allectus – propelled Britain to the centre of world events. Not only did they lead a breakaway empire from their power base in Britannia, they challenged the very authority of Rome itself.

Carausius and Allectus's story, inasmuch as we can reconstruct it, began when a succession of military rulers reunited a declining Roman empire following a period of political turmoil, only for their short reigns to end in their overthrow and assassination.

In AD 285, the emperor Carinus was defeated in battle by his rival Diocletian in a river valley in the Balkans, and it seemed as if the weary process of rebellion and overthrow would continue indefinitely. To remain master of the Roman world the victorious Diocletian would need a novel solution to the

empire's ills. Fortunately, Diocletian was an energetic reformer. He decided that a deputy ruler was needed to help deal with the rebellions and barbarian invasions facing him and, having no sons of his own, he appointed as junior co-emperor his old comrade-in-arms Maximian.

Maximian was sent west to Gaul, where a peasants' revolt had turned into open war, with cities being ransacked and burned. But the figure who shone most brightly in this war was not Maximian. It was another commander, a man of humble birth called Marcus Aurelius Mausaeus Carausius, a native of Menapia, an area corresponding roughly with modern Belgium. Impressed by his skills, Maximian gave Carausius command of the Roman fleet in the English Channel, and ordered him to clear the sea of Germanic pirates who were plundering coastal settlements. Maximian then departed to wage war against the Germans on the Rhine, leaving Carausius to his own devices.

Carausius's campaign against the pirates was highly effective, but somehow he fell out of favour with his superior. In AD 286 word reached Maximian that Carausius was keeping for himself the plunder taken from the pirates, rather than restoring it to its rightful owners. We'll never know if there was any truth to the accusation, but the emperor believed it and ordered that Carausius be put to death. Carausius defiantly proclaimed himself emperor in opposition to Maximian, and sailed for Britain.

By commandeering Rome's northern fleet and seizing the island of Britain, Carausius placed himself in a strong position. Without ships Maximian could not launch an invasion immediately, and this allowed Carausius to build up his defences. Britain also had three legions, and this combination of ground and naval forces made him a formidable power.

How Carausius established his rule over Britain is lost to us. He may have nurtured links before his usurpation, and it is possible that he had campaigned there in recent years, forging relations with leading figures and the legionary commanders.

CARAUSIUS MINTED HIGH-QUALITY SILVER COINS BETTER THAN ANYTHING THE ROMAN EMPIRE HAD ISSUED FOR OVER A CENTURY

Local support would help to explain why Carausius's breakaway British empire was so successful. We can see that his authority extended throughout the province: at Carlisle on Hadrian's Wall a milestone was erected in his name, and his coins are found widely throughout Roman Britain. Excavations at Roman strongholds along the southern and eastern coast of Britain, such as Portchester Castle in Hampshire, have revealed that Carausius had a hand in either building or strengthening these structures.

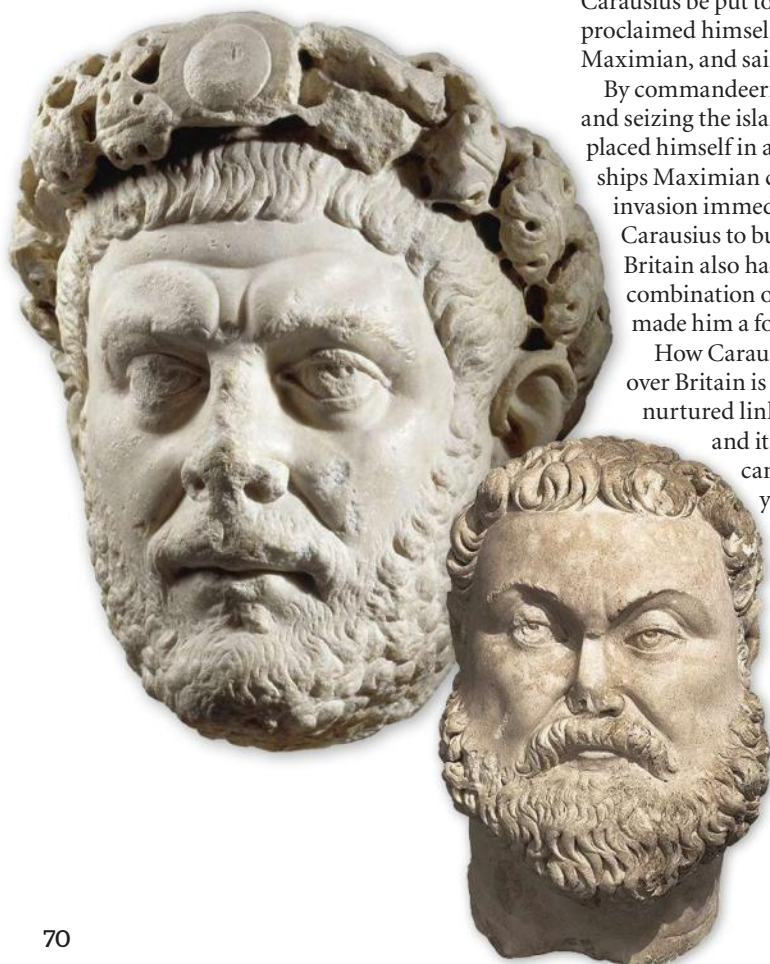
European conquest

Carausius also managed to attract others to his cause. After suppressing piracy in the Channel he was popular with merchants. He had allies among the tribes at the mouth of the Rhine, and even won over a continental legion, denying a swathe of the European coast to Maximian's armies. Soon, Boulogne, Rouen and Amiens had fallen into his hands.

The Roman historian Aurelius Victor, writing about 70 years later, credits Carausius as a skilful commander who protected Britain from warlike peoples – presumably referring to barbarians such as the Germanic pirates rather than Maximian's forces.

Perhaps the most unexpected aspect of Carausius's regime is its cultural pretensions. He flaunted Britain's mineral wealth by minting high-quality silver coins that were not only better than anything the Roman empire had issued for over a century but also extraordinarily diverse.

In portrait Carausius looks rather thuggish, with a close cropped beard and hair, a bull neck and beetling brow. It's hard to imagine such a man having an interest in high culture. Turn over the coins, though, and we have a remarkable and varied image of Britain as Carausius wanted it. It is true that there are references to military might (legions and ships), but there is a strong emphasis on peace and even images of rural idyll such as a milkmaid milking a cow. Many of the designs are highly allusive and would have required a literary education to appreciate their full meaning.



Diocletian (far left), who ruled as Roman emperor from 284–305 with the help of Maximian (left). In the late 280s both men were forced to confront an unexpected threat from Britain

SPENDING POWER

Britain's rebel emperors flaunted their might on coins



Capital gains
Allectus, who ruled as a usurper emperor 293–96, is shown on a gold coin from London



Force of arms
A medallion minted under Carausius bears an abbreviation of Virgil's verse "now a new generation is let down from high heaven"



Partners and equals
This coin from c292–93 shows Carausius alongside "his brothers" Diocletian and Maximian



Paradise returns?
A coin bearing the image of Carausius. The RSR on the reverse stands for "the dominions of Saturn return" – a reference to a golden age to which Carausius promised to restore the empire from his British base

Some Carausian coins bear the enigmatic letters RSR. For a long time, scholars argued over their meaning – were they a mintmark, or the initials of an official? The solution was provided by the historian Guy de la Bédoyère: it is an abbreviation of *redeunt saturnia regna*, "the dominions of Saturn return". Written three centuries earlier by Virgil in his poem the *Fourth Eclogue*, it is a reference to the Golden Age – a kind of Roman version of Eden.

Guy de la Bédoyère's theory was confirmed with another inscription on a medallion of Carausius: INPCDA, an abbreviation of the next line of Virgil's poem – *iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto*, "now a new generation is let down from high heaven." These literary references – together with other Carausian coin inscriptions, such as *revonat(or) romano(rum)*, "restorer of the Romans" – indicate that Carausius's regime was familiar with Virgil's poetry, and perhaps expected a literate audience in Britain to understand the abbreviations. They suggested that Carausius would restore Rome to its Golden Age – not from Italy, but from Britain.

To do so, Carausius needed to defend Britain from those who controlled Rome. By AD 289, Maximian was preparing his

invasion force, building a fleet and training sailors. A speech extolling him survives from that time, and foresees a glorious victory over the "pirate" Carausius. But it was not to be. Another speech in Maximian's praise, composed two years later, passes over Carausius in silence. The attempt at invasion had evidently failed, and Maximian's fleet had been bested or destroyed. That much we know from the fourth-century historian Eutropius, who bluntly tells us that Carausius's military experience had prevailed. Maximian was forced to arrange an ignominious peace.

'Brothers' at war

Peace and accommodation may have been what Carausius had wanted all along. Once again, his coins provide evidence of his intentions. Carausius is shown shoulder to shoulder with Diocletian and Maximian (see coin above), as their partner and equal. *Carausius et fratres sui*, reads the accompanying inscription ("Carausius and his brothers"). And, in an attempt to acknowledge Diocletian as the senior emperor, another coin reads: *augustus cum Diocletiano* ("To the emperors with Diocletian" – referring to himself and Maximian).



The approximate extent of Carausius's empire (AD 286–93)

But Diocletian had no intention of recognising Carausius as a colleague. He would appoint his co-rulers, and would not have the decision forced on him.

Carausius's victory was a threat to Diocletian's authority. In AD 290 or 291 the latter met with Maximian to confer on a strategy to deal with the British usurper. Maximian was heavily engaged fighting

IN CONTEXT

ROMAN BRITAIN'S CENTURY OF CHAOS

For the Roman empire, the third century AD was a time of political unrest, usurpations and barbarian invasions. For a few decades it looked as if the Roman empire was on the brink of disintegration as rival emperors struggled for supreme power or declared themselves independent.

Contemporary historical sources are scarce. Historians are often forced to reconstruct events of the period from chance finds – coins, inscriptions and occasional references in ancient literature. The reigns of Carausius and Allectus are no exception.

For much of the third century, Britain survived the troubles relatively unscathed. There are even signs of the province's increasing self-sufficiency and prosperity. From AD 260 to 273 it became part of a breakaway empire established in Gaul under the rebel emperors Postumus, Victorinus and then Tetricus.

In the later part of the century Britain began to suffer from attacks by Germanic raiders, and after the fall of this 'Romano-Gallic' empire in 273 the central powers may not have offered effective protection. The growing economic independence of Britain could have paved the way for political and military separatism born of disillusionment with Rome. There are hints of a failed British usurpation during the reign of Probus (AD 276–82), only a few years before Carausius's rebellion succeeded. The sentiments that created the first British empire may have been in the making well before Carausius.

This third-century decoration from a Roman sheath (possibly for a dagger) was found at Copthall Court in London



Pevensy Castle in East Sussex incorporates parts of a fort employed by Emperor Allectus to defend Britain from an assault by the Roman navy

Germans on the Rhine frontier, so Diocletian decided to appoint two new deputy emperors. Carausius, though, was not to be one of them.

Maximian's deputy was Flavius Valerius Constantius, nicknamed Chlorus, or 'Paleface'. An extremely gifted commander, Constantius's brief was to destroy the British empire. But to invade Britain he would first need to conquer Carausius's continental possessions. He began by laying siege to Carausius's port at Boulogne (AD 293), which he captured more by luck than by skill when an ineffective mole (breakwater) he built to blockade the harbour fooled the defenders into surrendering. Then Constantius's luck got even better. At some point, either shortly before or after the siege of Boulogne, news came that Carausius was dead.

A malignant foil

The circumstances of Carausius's end are unclear, but the historical tradition implicates Allectus, the very man who succeeded Carausius as Britain's second Roman emperor. If we know little about Carausius, we know even less about Allectus. Aurelius Victor tells us only that Carausius had placed him in charge of the treasury, that he was caught embezzling, and that Allectus killed Carausius to avoid punishment. Eutropius says merely that Allectus was Carausius's ally.

Maximian and Constantius may have concocted the story of Allectus's treachery in order to present their new opponent as an out-and-out villain. And that is his enduring reputation: a malignant foil to the gallant figure of Carausius. There are even hints, in a speech praising Constantius, that Allectus acted on the instructions of Maximian and Constantius, hoping to be recognised as

co-emperor. Whether Allectus killed Carausius or not, the fact that he remained on the throne would suggest that he had plenty of support in Britain itself.

If Allectus imagined that by disposing of Carausius his enemies would recognise him, he was sorely mistaken. Even so, Constantius needed more ships to take on Allectus's navy, and they would take time to build. This gave Allectus precious breathing space.

Evidence of Allectus's preparations have been found at Pevensy Castle, near Eastbourne in East Sussex. Excavations in the medieval keep at the eastern end revealed the foundations of a Roman wall with wooden stakes driven into the ground. The timbers could be dated quite closely to AD 280–300 – the time of Carausius and Allectus – and coins of the two British emperors were also found, suggesting that Allectus was strengthening his defences, building on the legacy of Carausius.

When it came, the invasion was two-pronged. In AD 296 Constantius set out from Boulogne with one part of the fleet, while his

BRITAIN, THE ISLAND AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD, HAD BEEN RESTORED TO ROME, AND CARAUSIUS' POWERFUL FLEET WAS BACK IN ROMAN HANDS



ABOVE: A relief panel on the Great Ludovisi sarcophagus in Rome depicts a battle scene in the third century INSET: A Londoner kneels before Constantius I on the gold Arras Medallion commemorating the emperor's victory over Allectus in AD 296

praetorian prefect, Julius Asclepiodotus, sailed from the mouth of the river Seine with the other. But it was the British weather, rather than strategy, that proved decisive.

Part of Allectus's fleet lay stationed off the Isle of Wight, ready to intercept the approaching force. Yet fog hid Asclepiodotus's ships and he was able to sail past unimpeded, eventually landing somewhere in Southampton Water. Asclepiodotus then gave the order to burn the ships, committing his forces to the war in Britain, and marched inland, perhaps hoping to capture London.

Allectus, realising that he had been caught off guard, abandoned his coastal defences and set off with his army to block Asclepiodotus's advance, but he was overwhelmed by the invading forces and cut down. The battle was over before Constantius even arrived.

The recovery of Britain is celebrated on the famous Arras Medallion (shown above) – the largest of all Roman gold coins to survive to this day – which depicts Constantius's

triumphant entry into London. *Redditur lucis aeternae*, the inscription reads, "the restoration of eternal light" (after the 'darkness' of Carausius and Allectus). Constantius is shown riding beside a ship to the gates of London, with a Londoner kneeling in supplication before him. Britain, the island at the edge of the world, had been restored to Rome. More importantly, Carausius's powerful fleet was back in Roman hands.

Carausius and Allectus lived in a particularly obscure period of Roman history, and Diocletian and his colleagues did all they could to expunge them from history. Their coinage was probably demonetised and any monuments to them destroyed.

However, this alone cannot explain why they scarcely figure in the national consciousness today; after all, we have made heroes of equally remote historical figures. Past attempts to incorporate them in a national narrative failed to take hold. In the 12th century Geoffrey of Monmouth retold their story in garbled form and, 600 years later, the antiquarian William Stukeley used Carausius's coins to show how Britain had once succeeded as a great naval power (both writers had a wild imagination!)

The Victorians far preferred the 'High' Roman period of Augustus and Hadrian (which they regarded as a model of empire) to the perceived decadence of the third and

fourth centuries. Carausius and Allectus had nothing to say to the myth-makers of that age – and maybe, as an immigrant from the continent, Carausius was deemed unsuitable.

Yet, as the first rulers to demonstrate that Britain could operate as an independent economic and naval power, Carausius and Allectus deserve to be better known. They represent an axial moment in the history of these islands, though the facts are scant.

Even their ultimate failure to hold on to Britain is a potent legacy. The success of Diocletian's new Roman empire depended heavily on the British empire's defeat and, had Allectus's fleet intercepted Asclepiodotus off the Isle of Wight in AD 296, history might have taken a very different course. Constantius would have been discredited; his son, Constantine the Great, might never have become emperor after him. And there might have been no Christian Roman empire at all. **H**

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DISCOVER MORE

BOOK

► **Carausius and Allectus: The British Usurpers** by PJ Casey (Batsford, 1994)

HISTORY EXPLORER

Extravagance in Roman Britain

Roman elite living in this outpost of the empire made themselves comfortable in lavish homes. Miles Russell visits the site of **Fishbourne Roman Palace**, a sumptuous building with possible royal connections

Fishbourne is one of the great success stories of British archaeology. The site was first discovered in 1960, when a mechanical excavator digging a trench for a water main hit a mass of tile and rubble. Subsequent excavations revealed a well-appointed, mosaic-filled palace (it is quite wrong to call it a 'villa') comprising four colonnaded wings set around an open courtyard. Put together by an army of highly skilled architects and craftsmen brought in from the European mainland, the entire edifice would have cost, in today's terms, around £8m to build.

The palace we see today developed from an earlier Mediterranean-style courtyard house, constructed at some point in the mid-60s AD. Although small by the later standards of the palace, it possessed an exquisite level of internal decor, including columns topped with Corinthian capitals, painted wall plaster, stucco, marble from eastern France and Italy, and black-and-white geometric mosaics. A fragment from a marble portrait of the young emperor Nero, on display in the palace museum, hints at possible links between the owners of the house and the imperial family.

Whatever the nature of this first grand design at Fishbourne, it seems it was never completed. Buildings west of the courtyard house were not much above foundation level before construction work ceased and a more extravagant building project undertaken. The new palace was constructed on a scale unprecedented in northern Europe.

Visitors to the site today often find it hard to comprehend the sheer size and scale of the remains set out before them. The modern visitor building protects only two-thirds of one wing (the northern), with the eastern, western and southern ranges all lying buried beneath gardens, housing and a modern road. At just over 150 metres square, the footprint of the building is greater than that of Buckingham Palace. To a native of Rome, such an exotic repertoire of decorative and architectural features would have appeared quite normal, but to the indigenous Briton, all this colour and fancy stonework would have been mind-blowing.


The original entrance to the palace was via a large hall, set on the central axis of the east wing. To the north of this entrance, separated from it by a range of administrative offices, was an aisled hall probably intended for semi-public assemblies and meetings between the outside world and representatives of the palace. Space to the south was dominated by a luxurious bathing suite.

The east entrance led directly onto a large open courtyard. Excavation here has revealed the bedding trenches for an ornamental hedge (now replanted), a Roman innovation that marks the beginnings of the British obsession for gardening.

The western range, containing areas for reception and entertainment, was originally constructed on a raised platform so that it would dominate the complex and, as a result, has suffered significantly from later ploughing. Nevertheless, it is clear that the main focus of the wing was a large apsed

PHILIP HARTLEY





“To an indigenous Briton, Fishbourne’s fancy stonework would have been mind-blowing”

DR MILES RUSSELL

Miles Russell stands cautiously next to Fishbourne’s famous ‘cupid on a dolphin’ mosaic, one of the finest such floors to survive from Roman Britain

Photography by Philip Hartley



**“An ornamental
hedge marks the
beginnings of the
British obsession
for gardening”**

DR MILES RUSSELL



The recreation of vine walks and herb beds at Fishbourne adds to the sense of the splendour of this palace at its first-century peak



Fishbourne's underfloor heating system (*hypocaust*) was the epitome of Roman comfort

room, almost certainly the main dining space (*triclinium*). The apse was designed to hold a curved dining couch (*stibadium*) on which guests could sit, eat, chat and enjoy between-course entertainment.

The north wing at Fishbourne formed the focus for three major units of accommodation. These took the form of apartments, each with their own bedrooms and dining room/reception areas. Such organisation of space raises questions as to how this range originally functioned. It may be that accommodation was set aside for important visitors or that separate residential areas were used by more than one high-status family.

Sadly, very little is known about the south wing at Fishbourne, most of which presently lies beneath the A259. Limited investigation in the gardens of houses that border the road suggests the range looked out towards a terraced ornamental garden and the sea. The bones of wild boar and deer recovered here may indicate that the palace owners had their own herds and hunting ground.

So who lived in a palace like this? It's a question archaeology has yet to answer convincingly. The probability is that it was

BONES OF WILD BOAR AND DEER RECOVERED HERE MAY INDICATE THAT THE PALACE OWNERS HAD THEIR OWN HERDS AND HUNTING GROUND

a newly installed administrator, state official (such as the governor or tax collector), businessman or merchant, desperate for the comforts of Rome, or someone who had aided the Roman cause: a prominent British aristocrat with connections. It is tempting to link the palace to two historically attested figures: Tiberius Claudius Togidubnus, a man cited on an inscription from nearby Chichester as a "Great King of the Britons", and Tiberius Claudius Catuarus, a wealthy Briton whose name was inscribed on a gold ring found just to the east of the palace.

But Fishbourne was only one of a number of early Roman palatial buildings established along the south coast of England in the latter half of the first century AD. Whoever the movers and shakers of the developing Roman province were, they seem to have enthusiastically developed ostentatious new homes at no little expense. The probability is that they were Britons on the make.

Within a few years, however, everything had changed. In the first decades of the second century, the great aisled hall at Fishbourne was torn down and a bath suite inserted into the north wing; the private apartments were dissolved and all larger spaces subdivided. This suggests that the period of single occupancy was over, and that the palace building was in the possession of two or more separate owners. It is from this later phase that the most famous 'cupid on a dolphin' polychrome mosaic, one of the finest floors to survive from Roman Britain, was created.

As the farming estates of southern England prospered through the third and fourth centuries AD, Fishbourne contracted and declined. Perhaps, given that the palace



Miles Russell explores the site of the palace



This statue fragment found at the site is now believed to depict a young Nero

was a place where the nouveaux riches spent their money swiftly and conspicuously, this is hardly surprising. The first villas, although influenced by the architectural repertoire of Fishbourne, were centres where wealth was generated, farming estates evolving gradually over time, their owners buying into Roman culture as and when finances allowed. Fishbourne had no way of sustaining its high level of expenditure and, when the money finally ran out, the building began to stagnate. In the later third century, a final, devastating fire ended whatever plans anyone had for the structure. ■

Miles Russell is senior lecturer in prehistoric and Roman archaeology at Bournemouth University

ON THE PODCAST

Listen to Miles Russell discuss Roman extravagance at Fishbourne Palace in our podcast of 23 January 2014
► historyextra.com/podcasts

ROMAN PALACES AND VILLAS

FIVE MORE TO EXPLORE



Fishbourne Roman Palace



Roman Way, Fishbourne,
West Sussex PO19 3QR
● sussexpast.co.uk

1 Brading Villa, Isle of Wight

● bradingromanvilla.org.uk

Medusa features heavily in the mosaics at Brading, as do more unusual images such as the famous 'cockrel-headed man'. Ovens and metalworking furnaces provide clues as to what happened here once the villa ceased to function as a residence. Examination of an aisled building nearby suggests that it may have originally served as the estate manager's house.



Medusa forms the centrepiece of one of Brading Villa's mosaic floors

2 Bignor Villa, West Sussex

● bignorromanvilla.co.uk

Bignor represents one of the finest examples of a well-to-do third- to fourth-century Roman villa in Britain. The sequence of house development – from third-century cottage to three-winged villa – is marked out on the ground, while the best mosaics, depicting Venus, Medusa, cupid gladiators and Ganymede being abducted by Jupiter in the guise of an eagle, are covered by a series of thatched cottages, first erected to protect the villa in the early 19th century.



Fishbourne Roman Palace, West Sussex

3 Lullingstone Villa, Kent

● english-heritage.org.uk

The importance of Lullingstone lies not just in its fine mosaic, Europa being abducted by Jupiter in the guise of a bull, but in the religious symbolism on the walls. Late in the fourth century, the owner commissioned a series of scenes depicting robed characters in prayer (with arms outstretched) and a Chi-Rho – an early Christian symbol, taking the first two letters from the Greek word for Christ. It seems that, late in its existence, this villa may have functioned as a house church.

4 Rockbourne Villa, Hampshire

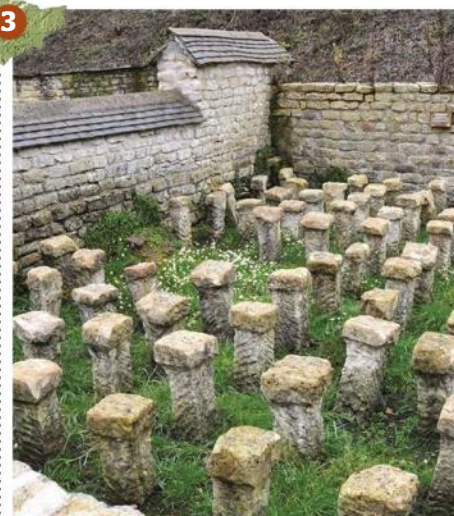
● hampshireculturaltrust.org.uk/rockbourne-roman-villa

Apart from its small on-site museum, the chief interest of Rockbourne is how the entire villa sequence can be clearly seen laid out on the ground today, from prehistoric roundhouse to three-room cottage to extensive tripartite villa. The latter was set around a courtyard with bath house, corn-drying ovens and an aisled building (the estate manager's house). Buried each winter to protect them from the elements are areas of the bath house and a small dining room with a curious geometric design possibly created to best position dining furniture.

5 Chedworth Villa, Gloucestershire

● nationaltrust.org.uk/chedworth-roman-villa

Chedworth is a fine example of a later Roman country estate. Cover buildings let visitors get close to the 'four seasons' mosaic of the dining room and the bath house, one of the best preserved of any in Britain. The changing room (*apodyterium*), warm room (*tepidarium*), hot room (*caldarium*) with underfloor heating, and cold room (*frigidarium*) with cold plunge bath, are all visible. On the approach to the villa, the main latrine – a no-doubt common feature but one rarely found in archaeological excavations – can also be seen. A shrine with an octagonal pool marks the villa's natural source of running water.



The remains of Chedworth's underfloor heating system. Stone pillars supported a floor through which hot air would rise

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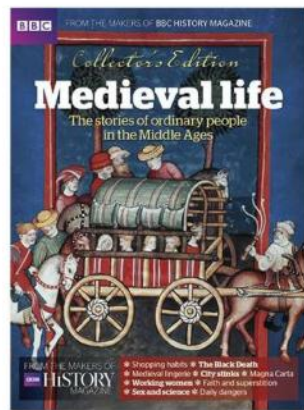
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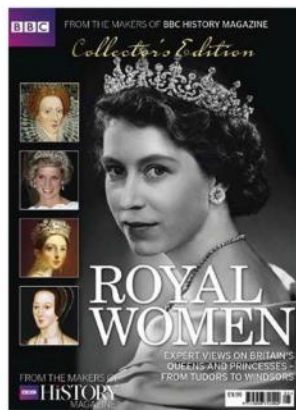
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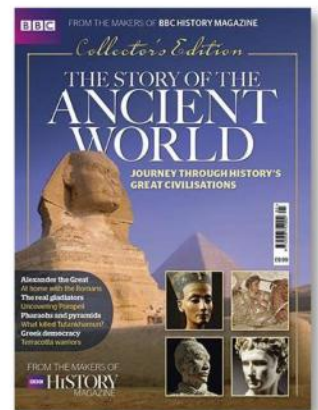
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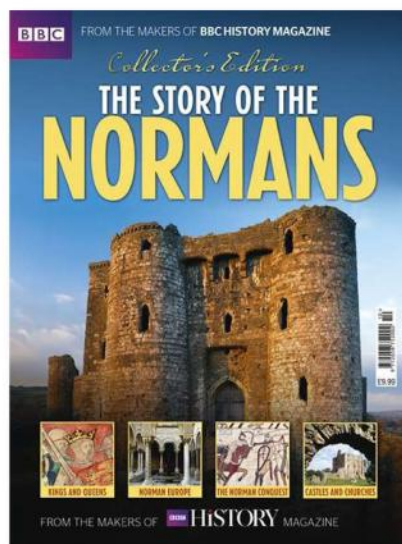
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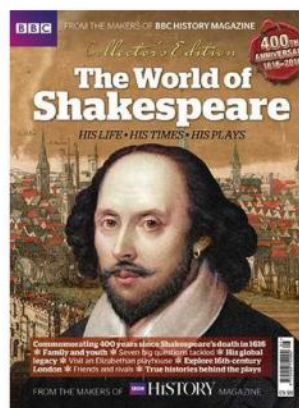
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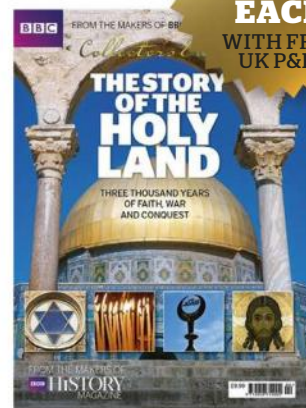


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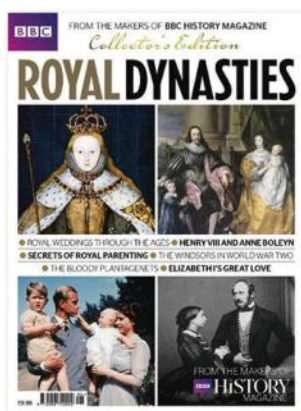
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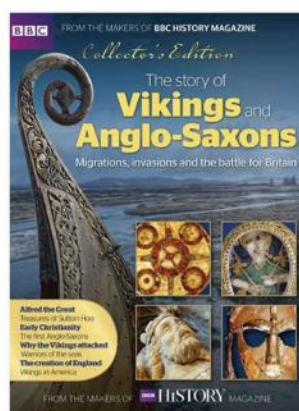
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LEGACY

APOCALYPSE THEN: AD 410

As the empire exits, civilisation collapses

THE END OF ROMAN BRITAIN

The long-lasting legacy of the occupation

EXPLOITED BY EMPIRE

Did Rome attempt to enrich Britain – or just itself?

WHAT THE ROMANS DID FOR US

The continuing influence of Roman culture



APOCALYPSE

The AD 350 Hare mosaic (now in Cirencester's Corinium Museum), Hadrian's Wall and the Bayeux Tapestry. By 1066, little trace of nearly four centuries of Roman occupation survived

THEN *circa 410*

Around the year 410, the Romans left Britain – and society collapsed in a way unmatched in our history. **Simon Young**, explores the end of imperial occupation and its calamitous aftermath

If you want to get a sense of the grandeur of Roman Britain, an excellent place to start is Portchester Castle on the edge of Portsmouth harbour. The Romans built a fort here in the third century AD, probably to guard Britain's shores from Saxon pirates. And this fort survived the collapse of Roman Britain.

It survived the Saxons – who by this time were not just raiding but invading Britain, and camped out in its grounds for a while. And then, as so often happened with Roman edifices, the fort just kept on surviving. The Normans built a tame little keep in the corner of the Roman behemoth, the relative size of the two marking the 11th century's reduced ambitions. Henry V inspected his fleet here before setting off for the glories of Agincourt in 1415.

This strategic Roman heirloom was held by parliament during the Civil War. In the 19th century, French and Dutch prisoners were herded into a makeshift prison inside the Roman walls – the same Roman walls that were incorporated into Britain's coastal defences during the Second World War. Today, locals play cricket in the huge bounds of Portus Adurni, as it was known in the Roman itineraries: 'the Fort at the Heights'.

What a history – the kind of thing that Kipling would have loved: the ten ages of England, with the Roman big brother looming behind every scene, an architectural Puck complaining about the men with pointy hats or the speed of the Spanish Armada. But actually, Portchester is just an accidental survivor of a 400-year experiment gone wrong: Roman rule in Britain.

The Celts, the Vikings, the Angles, the Saxons and the Normans all came to Britain, conquered and left their DNA in our cultural bloodstream. The Romans, however, came, saw, hung about a bit and then disappeared like smoke up the chimney.

This is not to say that Romanitas is irrelevant to Britain, as misguided attempts to trim the poor Romans from British A-level syllabuses might suggest. Rather, it is a reminder that, though Britain borrowed from and was inspired by Rome, these borrowings and inspirations were not handed down by the Romans themselves, as was the case in France or Italy or Spain. What Rome there is in Britain was imported later by medieval primers, renaissance textbooks and the public-school system. And Portchester and other similar ruins remain ghosts in British history – luxuriating in the dirt of a country that rejected them.

So why were the Romans in Britain a failure in comparison with Romans in other

THE ROMANS CAME, SAW, HUNG ABOUT A BIT THEN DISAPPEARED LIKE SMOKE UP A CHIMNEY

regions – or, indeed, with later invaders of the island? The usual answer is that Roman civilisation never took root in Britain, and there is some truth in that. The Romans theoretically ruled as far north as Hadrian's Wall, and held the tribes of the Scottish lowlands in submission. But, actually, vast tracts of 'Roman' Britain – Cornwall, the Pennines and parts of Wales – were virtually no-go areas in which the only territories under Roman rule were the roads. Even in the most Romanised parts of Britain – the southern counties – the would-be citizens were a bit of a disappointment to their Roman governors: few of them even bothered to learn Latin.

Indeed, Britons had a poor reputation everywhere. Their tall Celtic physique was not popular; one noted Roman scholar suggests that it was employed as a kind of colour bar by the usually tolerant Romans. If you look at the (short) list of famous Romano-Britons, you'll find a couple of usurpers, Boudica, a bad poet and a noted heretic. That's not much to recommend 400 years to posterity.

And the Romans could never get over the suspicion that the Britons were barbarians trussed up in togas. A bare-breasted, tattooed Britannia – a 'biker Britannia', as she has been fondly called – was the personification of Britain. One fourth-century Roman writer went so far as to say that being good and being a Briton was a contradiction in terms.

A detail from a sarcophagus showing Romans at war with barbarians, c250 AD





An aerial view of Portchester Castle shows the vast extent of the Roman walls – probably built by Carausius in the late third century – with the relatively modest Norman castle tucked into the north-west corner

But this provincial backwardness, this tribal bumptiousness is not enough to explain the sheer irrelevance of Roman Britain to British history. There were other parts of the empire where Roman rule was tenuous but where bits of it muddled on through, to be taken up gratefully by later centuries – for example, as its name suggests, Romania.

But in Britain this never happened. And that wasn't because of the poor quality of Roman life in the centuries of Roman rule but, rather, because of the way that Roman rule ended.

We all 'know', of course, that the legions left Britain, and that this took place c410. But even this is almost certainly wrong. In fact, the end of Roman Britain is caught up in a sticky web of events so complex that it is doubtful even a well-informed contemporary would have had a proper grip on what was happening.

A summary, free from all but essential details, might go as follows. In 407 the Rhine, the heavily defended frontier between the empire and the free German tribes, froze. Thousands – possibly hundreds of thousands – of Germanic warriors were able to bypass the guarded bridges and race into the west of the empire.

At this date or a little after, and for unknown reasons, the Roman legions in Britain revolted and departed for the continent under a pretender, Constantine III, 'to restore order'. They left the island largely undefended.

Constantine III went to fight the barbarians and the legitimate emperor, Honorius. But then, in what seems like an act of spite to those who prefer their history simple, Constantine's lieutenant, Gerontius, slipped across the border into Spain and declared himself emperor – and thus mortal enemy of both Constantine and Honorius.

There were now three Roman armies and a dozen Germanic tribes slugging it out for possession of western Europe. By 410 Honorius had managed to put down the usurpers, but the empire was tottering and Rome itself was sacked.

At about this time, it seems likely that Honorius decided to renounce his imperial claims on Britain, one of the most difficult-to-defend parts of the empire, and throw it to the barbarian wolves. Yet the legions did not leave Britain – they had already done that under Constantine. Rather, they were not sent back.

It is worth reflecting for a moment on just how naked Rome left the Romano-British people c410. Under imperial rule, no civilian was allowed to carry arms, unless for hunting. So a memorable scene from the Roman novel *Satyricon* sees the confiscation of an illegally owned sword – the carrier is planning to kill his gay lover – by a legionary.

This rule made a good deal of sense when the legions could defend you and your family.



Romano-British enamelled ornaments, dating from the first and second centuries AD

But if there were no legions around to enforce such rules, as happened in Britain from around 410, then it meant that a population without experience in war had to navigate a very steep learning curve in violence.

And the Britons had a good few barbarian enemies, of which three stand out. On the continent there were 'the Saxons', a portmanteau term for all the Germanic invaders who settled Britain – we today call them the Anglo-Saxons and they were, of course, the first English. In the north there were the Picts, who passed over Hadrian's Wall or around it in their boats. And in the west lurked the Irish, who seized parts of the south-west, Wales and possibly Lancashire.

Now consider what was at stake. Roman Britain had had an efficient standing army – perhaps 40,000 men under arms. It had been governed by a unitary state with bureaucracy – as we have seen, it was policed so well that civilians did not carry weapons. It had had an extraordinary 'proto-modern economy' (as it has been called) with factories, workshops, mills and mines; indeed, Roman slag piles in the Weald were so extensive that they were mined at the end of the Middle Ages.

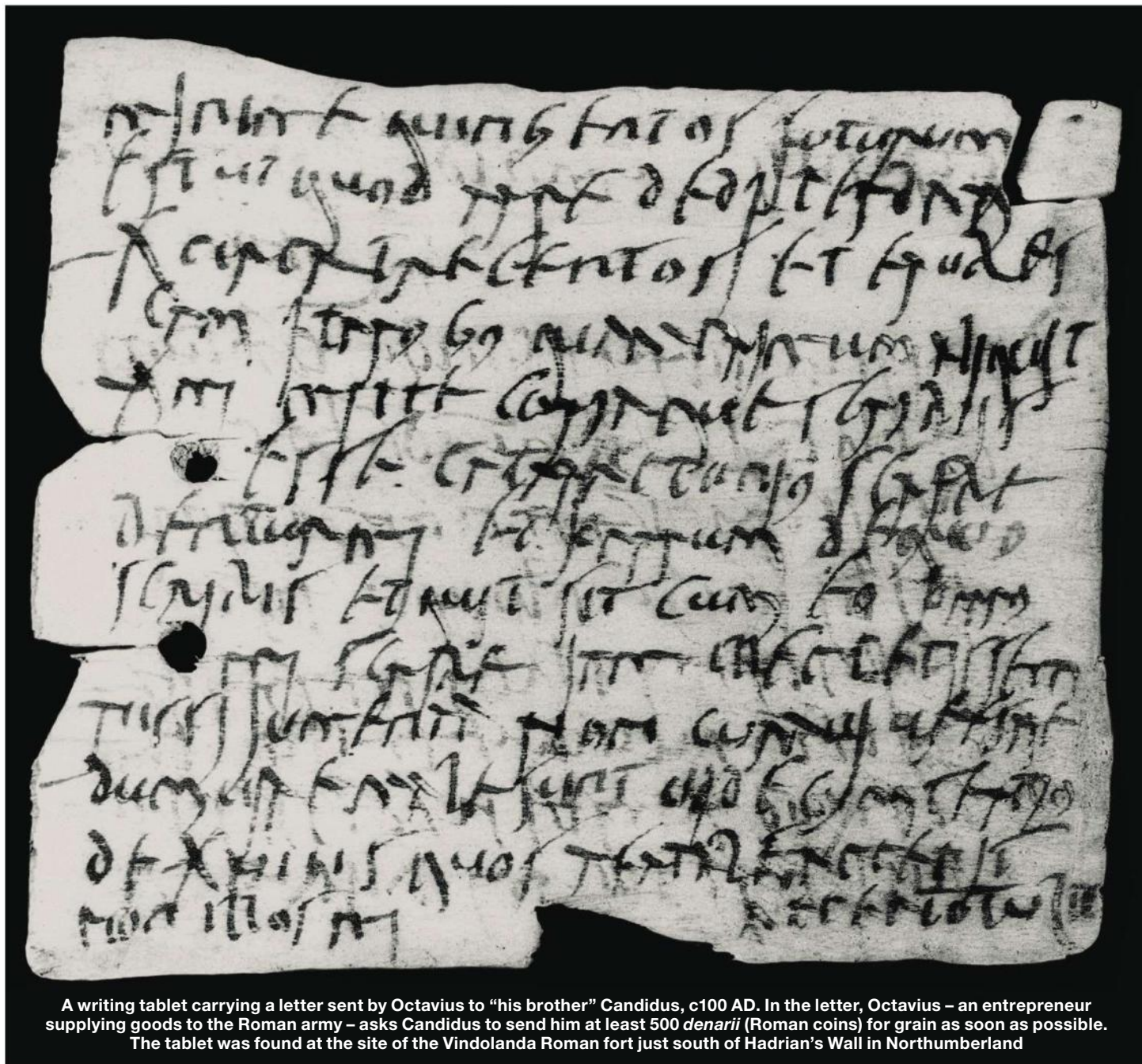
It had had an infrastructure of roads and piped water, and even heating that trumps its equivalent in some parts of southern Europe today. And it had been multi-ethnic. We are not speaking here just about Gauls and Italians in Londinium, but also Syrians on Tyneside and Arabians near Carlisle.

Blueprint for Britain

It is interesting to speculate which period of later British history best matches this description. In terms of the standing army, one can perhaps make a case for the 12th century – though who knows which side would have won if the Angevins had faced the Romans in the field. In terms of infrastructure, the Romans would have run the 18th century close. In terms of a multi-ethnic state, we would have to wait for the height of the British empire in the 19th century.

What should be clear from this description is that Roman Britain was, like ours, a complex society – and complex societies are more resistant to change than tribal or feudal equivalents. But when change burns out of control they prove more combustible: a complete meltdown is possible in a way that a 'primitive' society could never experience. And this is what happened to Roman Britain after 410: a meltdown.

The instability brought about by invaders and the difficulty of contact with the continent – as well, perhaps, as movements for independence within Britannia – had a devastating effect on the most Roman parts of the island. Long-distance trade broke



A writing tablet carrying a letter sent by Octavius to “his brother” Candidus, c100 AD. In the letter, Octavius – an entrepreneur supplying goods to the Roman army – asks Candidus to send him at least 500 *denarii* (Roman coins) for grain as soon as possible. The tablet was found at the site of the Vindolanda Roman fort just south of Hadrian’s Wall in Northumberland

down. Factories and cities emptied when food stopped getting through. Areas that had relied on pottery from these factories suddenly had to do without this most basic of all commodities.

Without an economy, taxes could not be collected for a central authority. Money no longer circulated – it was not trusted. And then, as the state vanished, repairs ceased to be made on roads, defensive structures and aqueducts.

A Romano-Briton coming of age in 400 may have lived in a city as a silversmith, an oculist or donkey veterinarian (to name three random jobs from the many found in Roman Britain), and would have hoped to send his children to school. He could have travelled across the country to have dream therapy at the Temple of Dreams at Lydney Park. He could have ordered luxury goods from the other side of the empire, as we know Romano-Britons did:

Mediterranean olives, sexy leather bras, catfish from the Nile.

That same Romano-Briton might have sent invitations for a birthday party, or a letter instructing an associate to sell a slave. (Examples of both such epistles survive from Roman Britain, the latter including the phrase “turn that girl into cash.”) He will have gossiped about celebrities: one Romano-

CITIES EMPTIED WHEN THE FOOD STOPPED GETTING THROUGH. IT WAS A MELTDOWN

British piece of graffiti claims that a gladiator and an actress are having an affair. He lived, in other words, in a society that, though different from our own, is far easier for us to understand than Britain in the seventh or the 12th or, for that matter, the 15th century.

Then... bang! Fast forward through Constantine, Honorius, independence, the Irish, the Picts and the Saxons. By 420, now aged 40, our Romano-Briton would no longer live in a city. He would no longer buy things with money but through barter, and the things for which he would barter would be locally produced. He would not have eaten off pottery but from wood or stone. Long-distance transport would have been out of the question – he would not have travelled.

He would have obeyed not an imperial nor even a national government but the strongest



This fourth-century Romano-British picture plate was found in Corbridge, Northumberland. It shows the god Apollo at a shrine

man who dwelt in the plain or hills to which our Romano-Briton had evacuated himself and his family. Writing was rapidly becoming useless, and it was unlikely that his children would have any schooling. And the security that the Roman state had offered was now, like the Roman state itself, a thing of the past, so he would have to learn to protect himself. He would no longer be an oculist or a vet or a silversmith, because there would be no call for specialists. He would do a bit of everything – fighting, farming, patching and improvising.

And so the 10 or 20 per cent of the population in the south that Rome had pulled up to a Roman level of living – the true Romano-British – fell back into the tribal, rural past or became slaves of foreign raiders.

No other moment in British history comes close to this kind of trauma. Indeed, it is a struggle to find anything like it in European history – for the bump from the ancient world to the medieval one went far more smoothly elsewhere.

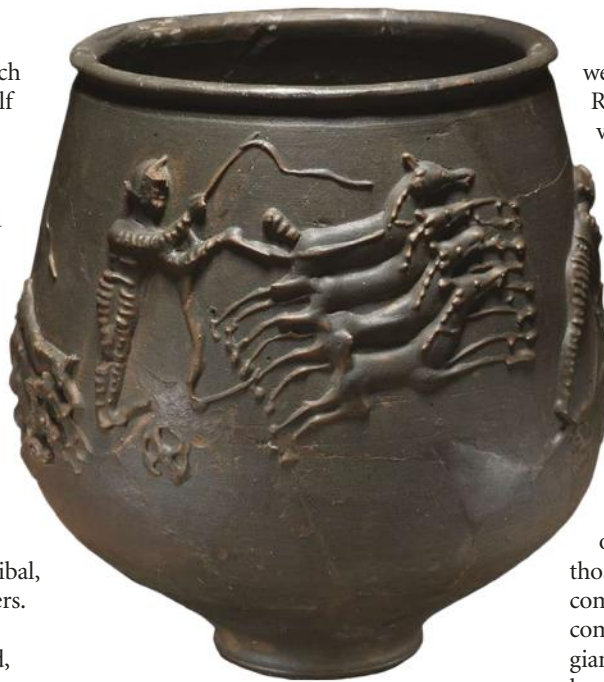
The archaeological record in Britain gives a sense of unmitigated disaster – the kind of thing that archaeologists in AD 3000 may find if they have to dig through the remains of a nuclear war. The late fourth century had not been a particularly rich time in the empire, but things were still being built and defences repaired. London's first cathedral arguably dates back to this period. However, as soon as we go past the magic date of c410 it is difficult to find traces of anything.

The blank century

If you sift through a section of British dirt from the four Roman centuries at a Roman site, you will discover coins and fragments of pottery sticking out of the compacted soil. Then at the next level up you will find nothing. It is as if someone turned off the electricity, the gas and the water all at the same time. In fact, for many years the only evidence that archaeologists were able to unearth to suggest any kind of civic building work in the fifth century was a single drainpipe that was laid at St Albans. Today, archaeologists are more sensitive to the remains of the survivors, and sometimes find structures in wood – jerry-built successors to Roman works.

We do not really know what happened in the wreck of Britannia, because for a century almost no written records survives. This lack of records is a reminder that writing was becoming less common, and is itself a product of the instability of those times.

True, rumours reach us about those years. We hear of Arthur and Vortigern, not to mention partitions, victories and defeats, but these have been passed through the sausage



A second-century pottery jar, discovered in Colchester, showing a chariot race

maker of Celtic myth and appear almost half a millennium later. They may or may not be true; certainly, they cannot be trusted. It is as if an audience has been watching with interest a play called 'The History of Britain' in a performance that continues through a power cut – but all that reaches the audience for this scene are the occasional sounds of scuffles and exclamations from the blackened stage. There is no century in Britain that has a better claim to being a Dark Age.

What is even more striking, though, is that when this power cut ends a century or two centuries later, and written sources begin to appear once again, there is no trace of Roman Britain. In the east of the island, the Anglo-Saxons have established their kingdoms; they have taken nothing from the Roman past, and pitifully little from the Romano-Celts. The fact that we mostly speak English – a Germanic language – today instead of modern Celtic (ie Welsh) or modern Latin (a British Romance language) is proof enough of this.

In the west, meanwhile, there are various Celtic successor states, but these too have left Rome far behind them. No surprise there. The

west had, after all, always been the least Romanised part of Britannia, and it was the very fact that those people had primitive tribal societies instead of sophisticated urban ones that allowed the Celtic kingdoms to come through the storm in one piece. They were better able to fight off the barbarians. Indeed, the only Roman thing that survived in those parts was Christianity – the official religion of the later empire – and, closely connected to Christianity, Latin writing.

But these are titbits, ghettoised in the Celtic fringes. All that remains of Roman Britain are the great construction works of the empire that inspired a sense of awe in those who come after. One Anglo-Saxon poet compared the wreck of a Romano-British complex, perhaps Portchester, to a "city of giants" – as if only a non-human agency could have created something so extraordinary.

Modern Britain finds its roots in the Anglo-Saxon fiefdoms of those years: religion, common law, the English language. It also owes much to its pre-Roman Celtic past, which reasserted itself in the west of the island when Rome disappeared: our Celtic languages, our attitude to continental Europe, the relationship between centre and periphery in British history. But to Roman Britain, modern Britain owes almost nothing.

It is true that some of our oldest cities may have been positioned by the Romans, London among them. It is unquestionably true that some hulks, such as Portchester, still survive for tourists to crawl over at the weekend. It is also true that some of our roads run along the straight courses of imperial highways. But if we are looking for important traces of Roman Britain in the make up of the UK, we look in vain.

Perhaps Rome's only significant gift is a lesson about the fragility of complex societies. Certainly, if you want to know what would happen to Britain in 2017 if the petrol suddenly stopped getting through, you could do a lot worse than go to a Roman villa in the home counties and dig down to the level of the year 410, when the coins and pottery run out. ■

Simon Young is a historian specialising in early medieval British history. He is the author of *Farewell Britannia: A Family Saga Of Roman Britain* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007)

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ONE ANGLO-SAXON POET COMPARES A ROMANO-BRITISH COMPLEX TO A "CITY OF GIANTS"



THE END OF ROMAN BRIT

Ken Dark and **David Musgrove** explore the dramatic final moments of Britannia, and introduce nine places to visit that are connected to this part of the story

For Ken Dark, historian at the University of Reading, the end of the Roman period poses probably the biggest unanswered question in British history during the first millennium AD. “The debate is,” he says, “very sophisticated and subtle, to say the least.”

In AD 410, after almost four centuries of Roman rule in Britain, the embattled Roman emperor Honorius seems to have issued a

declaration that the Britons needed to look to their own defence. What happened next is one of the greatest enigmas in British history and archaeology. Did Roman ways of life stop suddenly and completely, did they carry on, or did they morph into something new?

Yet AD 410 may be a red herring. Though the letter from Honorius does exist, some historians dispute whether it actually refers to Britain, suggesting that it might instead allude to part of Italy. Regardless of the validity of the declaration, the end of the Roman period

cannot be confined to a single year. “There wasn’t one day on which ‘the Romans’ said ‘we’ll up and go’ and the legions marched out, not least because the Romans weren’t an ethnically defined group,” argues Dark. “Most of them would have been descendants of the local Britons who’d inhabited Britain for centuries before the Roman conquest, but they would have also included a substantial multicultural population drawn from all over the Roman empire. Before, say, 400 most of that population would probably have considered itself to be Roman, in the sense of being Roman citizens.”

Whatever actually happened in 410, during the fifth century there was a shift across Europe from a Roman to a post-Roman society as imperial influence waned. Britain was part of that trend, and may have changed in line with developments in other former imperial provinces in western Europe. Two main trends were the increasing spread of

The still-impressive walls of Portchester Castle in Hampshire were built by the Romans in the third century AD as a coastal defence against raiders

AIN

Christianity and the incorporation of ‘barbarian’ – that is, non-Roman – cultural attributes. These changes were widespread in Roman society across the empire, but the fifth century also saw the movement of ‘barbarian’ peoples into Roman territory in far greater numbers – frequently as rulers or raiders rather than refugees or Roman soldiers.

In Britain, we usually call these fifth-century (and later) Germanic migrants ‘the Anglo-Saxons’, though neither they themselves nor anyone else referred to them by that name in the fifth century. Nor is it known whether the Anglo-Saxons initially came as invaders or settlers, in large numbers or small groups, or to live among or to lord over the Britons. Ken Dark’s view is that they did come in large numbers in some parts of Britain, but what they did when they arrived is complicated. “I believe that there was mass migration across the North Sea by Germanic peoples, and that they settled

in substantial parts of eastern Britain, most notably East Anglia,” he says. “In those places they brought their own cultures substantially intact, but there were other areas, even in the east of Britain, where Germanic and British communities lived side by side or together, and where their cultural practices and values co-existed or merged.” To the west and north of these ‘Anglo-Saxon’ areas, British kings ruled over large independent kingdoms in the fifth and sixth centuries, with populations wholly or largely descended from those of Roman Britain.

The latter point is crucial. One of the big advances in the study of the period in the past few decades has been the framing of the debate in terms of the existing occupants, and away from the previous heavy focus on the incoming Anglo-Saxons. At least until the end of the sixth century it was Britons, not Anglo-Saxons, who controlled the majority of what had been Roman Britain, so the need to study the Britons

for themselves rather than as a footnote to the Anglo-Saxons has been widely recognised.

Indeed, many specialists now term these centuries of British history ‘Late Antiquity’ – a term widely used in relation to the fifth- and sixth-century history of the rest of what had been the Roman empire – rather than the ‘Early Anglo-Saxon period’. This shift in focus, closely associated with Dark’s work on the period, has enabled historians and archaeologists to look more closely at what happened to the remaining Britons, and to identify that some elements of Roman culture did cross over to their post-Roman world.

Gradually, however, the Roman influence waned, and in the seventh century we moved into a new world – one in which Anglo-Saxon and British kingdoms jostled for power across a land starting to forget its Roman past.

Words by **David Musgrove**. Historical advisor: Ken Dark, University of Reading



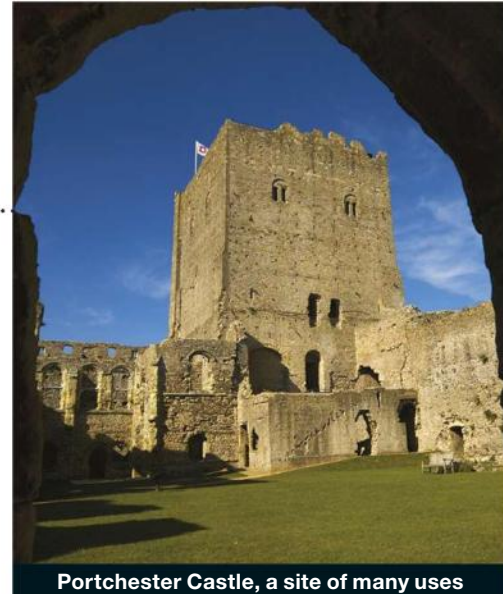
- 1 Portchester Castle, Hampshire
- 2 Lullingstone Villa, Kent
- 3 Birdoswald Fort, Cumbria
- 4 West Stow, Suffolk
- 5 St Albans, Hertfordshire
- 6 Wroxeter Roman City, Shropshire
- 7 Cadbury Castle, Somerset
- 8 Tintagel, Cornwall
- 9 Deganwy Castle, Conwy

1 Portchester Castle HAMPSHIRE

Where late Roman Britain was to be defended

How were the people of late Roman Britain planning to defend themselves against the threat of barbarian raiders? Go to Portchester and you can see precisely what they had in mind. Here is preserved a fine example of the coastal defences of Roman Britain. Though it's often characterised as a fort of the Saxon Shore (a military command of the Late Roman empire), it may actually have been built in the third century, before that command was established.

It offers an interesting insight into the way in which Roman imperial thinking about defence had changed by the late empire. One of the symbols of that change is the massive, almost castle-like character of late Roman fortifications, which you see very well at Portchester. It's the only



Portchester Castle, a site of many uses

Roman stronghold in Britain with walls still standing almost complete to their 6m height. It's had a long life since Roman days, being the site successively of a Norman keep, a 14th-century palace, an embarkation point for the Agincourt campaign and a jail for Napoleonic prisoners of war. Despite that it remains a very visible signal of the defensive strategy of the late Roman Britons.

► www.english-heritage.org.uk



A fourth-century Christian wall painting from the house-church at Lullingstone Villa

2 Lullingstone Villa KENT

Where the arrival of Christianity is clear to see

The villa had been introduced into Britain as a habitation type at the start of the Roman period, and indeed Lullingstone was begun about AD 100. But most known Roman villas in Britain are actually late Roman in date. The great period of flourishing Roman villas in Britain was the fourth century, when large parts of the British landscape were divided up into estates centred around such properties.

Lullingstone is a good example of a late-Roman villa. They were often quite modest, but some were elaborately decorated and architecturally sophisticated. Lullingstone was towards the top of the range but was not a palatial example (for that, Chedworth in Gloucestershire is worth a visit).

Villas were in part built for showing off, but they also often had a religious

element, first with links to pagan temples and then perhaps as centres of rural Christianity. The spread of Christianity in the late Roman and post-Roman period is a key part of the story of the end of Roman Britain. Lullingstone's house-church (a room within an otherwise secular building devoted specifically to Christian observance) shows that Christianity had certainly reached this villa.

House churches are hard to spot archaeologically but we know about Lullingstone because of its splendid series of wall paintings with Christian symbols. The paintings are now in the British Museum but copies can be seen at Lullingstone, along with the layout of the villa.

► www.english-heritage.org.uk

3 Birdoswald Fort CUMBRIA

Where frontier life carried on – in some form, at least

We don't know exactly what was happening on Hadrian's Wall in the late Roman period. It was intensively used and still served as some sort of frontier, perhaps for taxation, symbolic and military purposes. To the north were Britons who were in many ways similar to those south of it – but some of them at least were intent on disrupting life in Roman territory.

At Birdoswald you can see a fort, turret and milecastle, plus the longest unbroken stretch of wall nearby. However, most interesting in terms of the end of Roman Britain was the discovery of a large timber hall, perhaps dating to the fifth century and now marked out with posts. Does this represent continuous use from Roman to post-Roman periods, or later re-use – and if so, by whom? It could have been the case that the Roman-period communities at the wall stayed on into the fifth century, and that the forts had an ongoing military role, or they might have been abandoned for a while and then refortified by whatever new political powers stepped into the vacuum. Certainly, the site's defensive possibilities were recognised long after the Romans left: a medieval fortified tower was built here, and then an Elizabethan bastle house.

► www.english-heritage.org.uk



The site of the timber hall and granary at Birdoswald Fort on Hadrian's Wall

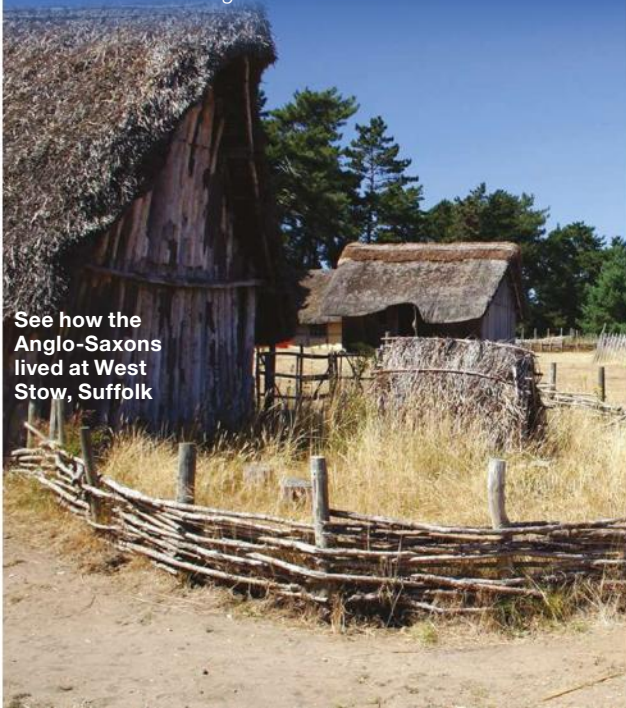
4 West Stow SUFFOLK

Where the Anglo-Saxons settled

This reconstructed Anglo-Saxon village, built on an original settlement site of the period, provides an excellent introduction to the life of these newcomers from the continent. This sort of farming settlement replaced the Roman administrative set-up in the fifth and sixth centuries in eastern Britain, and it's interesting when visiting to think about how different the world in which the Anglo-Saxons lived was from Roman Britain. There are numerous Anglo-Saxon-type buildings here, constructed in different ways as experimental archaeology projects, based on data from excavations in the 1960s and '70s.

☎ 01284 728718

► www.weststow.org



See how the Anglo-Saxons lived at West Stow, Suffolk

5 St Albans HERTFORDSHIRE

Where Christianity lived on in post-Roman Britain

After the third-century martyrdom of Alban, condemned to death for sheltering a Christian, the Roman town of Verulamium became a centre for Christian activity, and there's literary evidence to suggest that it retained that role through the fifth and sixth centuries. It's mentioned in the fifth-century *Life of St Germanus* as a major Christian shrine visited by Germanus as he progressed around eastern Britain in AD 429, trying to fight off the advances of the Pelagian heresy (which essentially posited the belief that people can be good of their own account and thereby implied the denial of original sin).

In the mid-sixth century, the British writer Gildas lamented that he couldn't get to the famous

pilgrimage shrine of St Alban because the Anglo-Saxons were in the way. Move forward to the early eighth century and Bede wrote that St Albans was a major Christian shrine that had remained in use since Roman times.

The archaeological evidence suggests that there was activity here in the fifth and sixth centuries, but exactly what that was is hard to characterise.

There's nothing visibly fifth-century in the fabric of the current cathedral, but the Verulamium Museum gives an overview of life in the Roman city, and you can still see the Roman walls, hypocaust and theatre.

☎ 01727 751810

► www.stalbansmuseums.org.uk



Objects from an important find near St Albans



The remains of the Roman theatre of Verulamium (St Albans), built around AD 140. After the martyrdom of Alban in the third century the settlement became an important pilgrimage site

ALAMY

“Bede wrote that St Albans was a major Christian shrine that had remained in use since Roman times”



6 Wroxeter Roman City SHROPSHIRE

Where Roman urbanism continued

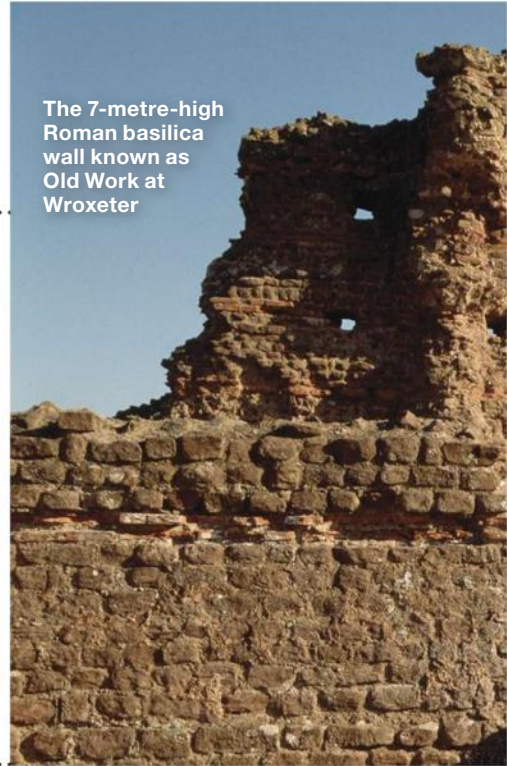
This Roman city has been a tourist destination for over 150 years. But it was only as a result of excavations in the 1960s and '70s that archaeologists began to truly appreciate the grand scale on which Wroxeter was rebuilt in the fifth and possibly sixth centuries. It's hard to say when the city fell out of use but it certainly appears to have had a long life after the end of Roman Britain: timber and wattle and daub buildings were built, and then rebuilt perhaps more than once, across a large part of the city centre. It's interesting that these buildings share many affinities with classical Roman architecture:

in design, layout and size they are essentially Roman buildings, but built of wood, not stone.

The material culture associated with them is identical to that of the later fourth century, so at this site the latest Roman material culture is associated with buildings occupied into the fifth century: it seems that people at Wroxeter attempted to maintain the Roman way of life. If you visit, be sure to admire the great wall that divided the second-century municipal baths from the exercise hall – a reminder of what Roman Britain looked like at its height.

► www.english-heritage.org.uk

The 7-metre-high Roman basilica wall known as Old Work at Wroxeter



An aerial view of Cadbury Castle hill-fort in Somerset

7 Cadbury Castle SOMERSET

Where the British elite showed off their power

Not all Britons attempted to carry on urban life like the inhabitants of Wroxeter. Others opted to reoccupy and refortify Iron Age (pre-Roman) hill-forts.

The Britons in the immediate post-Roman period replaced Roman local government with kings, and these re-used hill-forts may have been the kings' royal centres: they were often associated with the consumption of foreign luxury goods. Cadbury Castle is

an excellent example of a place where high-status activity was going on – a considerable amount of pottery and glass, imported from the Mediterranean and Gaul, has been found within its huge earthen banks. Today the ramparts are all that remain at this fine hill-fort, which incidentally is happily set in a pleasant corner of rural Somerset.

► www.discoverysouthsomersex.com

CORBIS/SKYSKAN PHOTOLIBRARY-ALAMY/SKYSKAN-CORBIS

8 Tintagel

CORNWALL

Where the new kings continued old ways

Something very significant happened on the north Cornish coast in the fifth and sixth centuries. At Tintagel, archaeologists have found evidence of more than 150 buildings bearing decidedly Roman characteristics such as rectangular layouts and multiple rooms. They were enclosed within a hefty bank and ditch cutting off the landward approach but with access to a natural harbour below. And that harbour was probably a very busy place. An enormous amount of imported Byzantine pottery, amphorae and

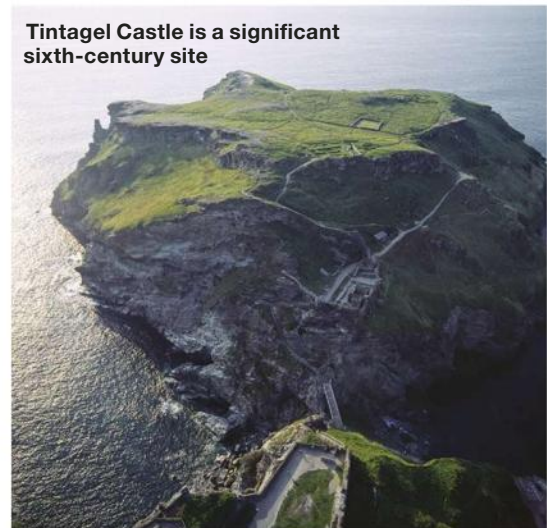
glass has been discovered in excavations here, suggesting that this settlement, established after the end of the Roman period in the fifth century, was in many respects more Roman in its architecture, plan and finds than any other site known in Cornwall.

The recent discovery of a Latin inscription at Tintagel adds to the evidence that Roman influence continued to spread in Britain after AD 410. It's thought that Tintagel was probably a royal site of the British kingdom of Dumnonia, which seems to have encompassed most of England's south-west peninsula at this time.

Today the fifth and sixth century remains are rather overshadowed by the ruins of the 13th-century castle and Arthurian associations.

☎ 01840 770328
► www.english-heritage.org.uk

Tintagel Castle is a significant sixth-century site





9 Deganwy Castle CONWY

Where British resistance lived on

This imposing two-pronged rocky knoll overlooking the river Conwy was probably the leading royal site of the British kingdom of Gwynedd, which encompassed, roughly speaking, the north-west of Wales including the island of Anglesey.

Gwynedd was important from at least the sixth century, and formed a focus of resistance against the eventual spread of political control by the Anglo-Saxons as

they developed more centralised kingdoms. The last major British victory against the Anglo-Saxons in the 630s was won by one of the kings of Gwynedd. In fact, the Britons of Gwynedd were never conquered by the Anglo-Saxons as such. It was not until long after the formation of the kingdom of England that the English kings took control here. So when in 1282 the area fell to English rule, it was the last part of

the western Roman empire to be lost to the political control of the descendants of those who had at one time lived within that empire. There's nothing of the sixth-century occupation to see at the site today, but evidence of later castles built on the site does survive. **H**

☎ 01492 577577

► www.castlewales.com

Deganwy Castle in Gwynedd was destroyed in 1263





History lauds Rome's 'advanced' civilisation, capable of creating the extraordinary glass Lycurgus Cup, as a benefit to barbarian Britons

EXPLOITED BY EMPIRE

DID ROME BENEFIT BRITAIN?

Roads, currency, calendars and sewers: the Romans introduced any number of advances to Britain – or so conventional wisdom claims. But was the Roman conquest really a great civilising opportunity for the British peoples, asks **David Mattingly** – or a period of prolonged military occupation and exploitation?

The history of Roman Britain has often been written – perhaps too often, given the relative paucity of conventional historical sources.

Problematically, the subject has remained profoundly influenced by outmoded research agendas that arose in the age of modern colonialism, and which impede our understanding of the impact of the Roman interlude.

When Victorian and Edwardian Britain sided wholeheartedly with the Roman invaders rather than with the subjugated natives, this was perhaps a natural response from servants of a great modern empire that controlled one-third of the territory and population of the world, and that modelled itself in part on Roman structures. Consciously or subconsciously, most writers on Roman Britain have tended to form a view on whether or not the fact of Roman government was a positive thing. The perspective is neatly illustrated in *1066 and All That*, the famous spoof history of Britain written by RJ Yeatman and WC Sellar: “The Roman Conquest was, however, a Good Thing, since the Britons were only natives at that time.”

This tells us nothing, of course, about ancient reality, and everything about late-19th- and early 20th-century beliefs. The ‘father of Romano-British archaeology’ in the early 20th century, Francis Haverfield, summed up this attitude of underlying sympathy with modern colonialism: “The old theory of an age of despotism and decay has been overthrown, and the believer in human nature can now feel confident that, whatever their limitations, the men of the [Roman] Empire wrought for the betterment and happiness of the world.”

This sympathy for worthy Romans has manifested itself, for example, in the adoption of prominent Romans as the ‘founders’ of many modern British cities – a notable case being the governor Agricola, whose statue occupies pride of place over the entrance to Manchester Town Hall. The attitude still prevails. Some years ago I was consulted about a plan to erect a statue in Leicester, and was asked to suggest an individual associated with the city’s formative years. I proposed an Iron Age British ruler, because there is a paucity of ‘Romans’ who can be definitively linked to Leicester, and the earliest settlement pre-dates the foundation of the Roman town. This clearly did not fit the bill, and the idea was quietly dropped.

Nostalgic association with Roman

OUR VIEWS ON THE ROMAN EMPIRE REMAIN CONSTRAINED BY OUTMODED ASSUMPTIONS

colonisers still underscores much writing on Roman Britain. The Romans, we are told, brought towns, roads, stable government, the villa economy, art, culture, literacy, togas, baths and other elements of high culture. By the same token, in many popular accounts the native Britons are presented stereotypically as semi-naked, spiky-haired, tattooed and woad-painted ‘barbarians’.

Rome’s civilising mission?

This favourable vision of imperialism (and concomitant denigration of native Britons) remains enshrined in the popular image of Roman Britain. But is it really deserved? The stress on Rome’s civilising mission, the benefits of her rule and so on contrasts with perceptions of the Norman conquest, the negative impacts of which have never been denied in quite the same way. The point is neatly illustrated in Tom Stoppard’s play *Indian Ink* when an Indian is informed by an ex-Memsahib that: “We were your Romans, you know. We might have been your Normans.” Can we really distinguish between nice Romans and nasty Normans?

Half a century after the effective final dismantling of the British empire, it seems extraordinary that our views on the Roman empire remain constrained by outmoded collective assumptions about the legitimacy of imperialism, with profound consequences for the reading and writing of that history. In

Britain’s, and especially England’s, national mythology, the Roman period is presented as one of development and opportunity far more than one of defeat, subjugation and exploitation. Books on ‘Roman Britain’ tend to present a top-down vision, with the emphasis on conformity, progressive change and elite culture (exemplified by the problematic Romanisation paradigm). Only in the Celtic ‘fringes’ has there been much interest in the themes of resistance and underdevelopment.

An alternative to the orthodox approach focuses greater attention on the fate of Britain as an imperial possession during nearly four centuries of foreign domination, exploring more fully the positive and negative aspects of imperial rule and their impacts on subject peoples. In terms of negative aspects, post-colonial studies of modern empires have done much to show up imperialism’s flaws by focusing on the experience of colonised peoples. It is clear, for instance, that the idea of the ‘white man’s burden’ was largely a post-facto attempt at self-justification. How often, when power was abused or people and resources unreasonably exploited, was the excuse trotted out that the ends justified the means? Empires use power to induce people to comply with their authority and to deliver up resources, while subjects devise their own stratagems to evade obligations such as taxation.

British public opinion has not always taken kindly to post-colonial criticism of imperialism. In the 1980s, performances of Howard Brenton’s play *The Romans in Britain* caused a furore because of the staged rape of a male Briton by a group of Roman soldiers. In part the outcry was provoked by this being a graphic and shocking piece of theatrical sex-and-violence, but for some this was compounded by the fact that parallels were being drawn between Roman imperialism and the modern experience of Northern Ireland patrolled by British troops. The violence is the sort of plausible outrage that imperialism begets (and about which we would prefer not to be reminded). The play was performed again in Sheffield in 2006 – a timely revival, when British troops were still embroiled in the neo-imperial nightmare of Iraq.

The Roman exploitation of conquered peoples operated differentially according to the circumstances of their surrender and their subsequent behaviour. The following quote from a Roman land surveyor, Siculus Flaccus, summarises the process: “Certain peoples, with pertinacity, have waged war against the Romans; others, having once experienced Roman military valour, have kept the peace; others, who had encountered Rome’s good faith and justice, declared their submission to the Romans and frequently took up arms



Manchester’s 19th-century town hall honours Agricola as a founder of the city – though it is far from certain he built the first fort there

This 1831 painting of Romans teaching ancient Britons exemplifies 19th-century attitudes to the occupation



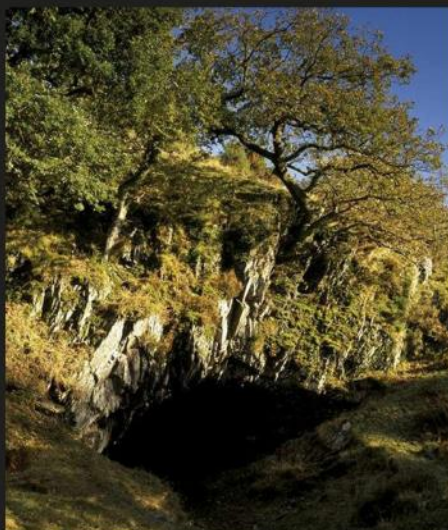
WHAT THE ROMANS DID TO US

Military occupation

Britain endured 350 years of military occupation, with the heavy burden of costs falling on provincial peoples

Natural resources

Most of the profits from the exploitation of minerals were taken by the state



Government and autonomy

There was limited urban growth in southern Britain, but socio-economic development was stymied in large parts of western and northern Britain

Dolaucothi Gold Mine: Romans used slaves and forced labour to exploit Britain's natural resources

Demographic impacts

Wars, revolts, enslavement and enforced conscription into the Roman army all had significant effects

Land and taxes

Britons were deprived by the substantial reallocation of land and the imposition of taxes

A Roman road at Blackstone Edge. Roads were vital for the movement of troops and supplies



ALAMY

FOR THE MAJORITY OF ITS SUBJECTS, ROMAN BRITAIN REMAINED A MILITARISED AND EXPLOITED TERRITORY



Writing tablets from Vindolanda Fort include a Roman military report describing the Britons' fighting methods

against their enemies. This is why each people has received a legal settlement according to merit: it would not have been just if those who had so frequently broken the peace and had committed perjury and taken the initiative in making war were seen to be offered the same guarantees as loyal peoples.”

We should thus expect to see a high degree of regional diversity within Britain, reflecting varying degrees of generosity, exploitation and penalisation. Conventional studies of Roman Britain downplay this important element of nonconformity.

A militarised territory

The human costs of Roman conquest and domination should also not be forgotten. The invasion of AD 43 involved the use of exemplary force, but did not lead to rapid acceptance of military occupation. Major campaigning continued for two generations after the Claudian invasion, with the Boudican revolt (AD 60–61) exacting a particularly high cost in lives. For the majority of its subjects, Roman Britain remained a militarised and exploited territory. This was not, then, a ‘Golden Age’, though there were golden opportunities for select individuals among the British elite and assorted immigrants.

These were the exceptions, participating in government and enjoying a certain level of influence and wealth.

For the majority, the benefits of Roman rule were less tangible than the conventional archaeological presentation of Roman Britain would suggest (see page 103). The large size of the military garrison – at its peak, more than one-tenth of the available armed forces of the empire – exacted a high price on civilian communities in all parts of the island, and this continued for generation after generation. The slow development and early decline of towns (and the limited extension of the known area of civil local government in southern Britain) is hardly a resounding success story. The villa, that archetypal marker of rural wealth, was also limited in distribution and numbers, especially before its early fourth-century florescence. Natural resources, notably mineral deposits, were confiscated for the benefit of the state, and the redistribution of land was also a tool of exploitation through rents and taxes. Especially in the first century of Roman rule, deaths in warfare and revolts, enslavement and transportation, and enforced conscription were significant motors for demographic change, exacerbated by the inflow of new groups into influential positions in provincial

society in Britain (carpet-baggers from northern Gaul, discharged soldiers and so on).

Britannia was an expensive province, and one with a distinctly military and financially exploited character. To be sure, this was a period of significant social and cultural changes, though these were more complex and regionally more varied than commonly presented. For every winner under Roman rule there were a hundred losers, with the gap between richest and poorest widening as never before. Above all, we must recognise that Britain’s early experience of empire – as an imperial possession – was far removed from its later destiny as a collector of colonies. **H**

David Mattingly is professor of Roman archaeology at the University of Leicester, and author of *An Imperial Possession: Britain in the Roman Empire, 54 BC – AD 409* (Penguin, 2006)

DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

- **An Atlas of Roman Britain** by Barri Jones and David Mattingly (Oxbow, 2002)
- **Short Oxford History of the British Isles: The Roman Era** edited by Peter Salway (Oxford University Press, 2002)



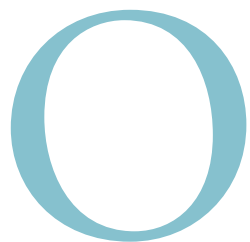
An elaborate mosaic dating from the third century AD, believed to represent the goddess Venus, at Bignor Roman Villa in West Sussex. The discovery of the villa in 1811 caused a sensation



WHAT THE ROMANS *DID FOR US*

Though the physical heritage of Rome's British occupation is well known, the cultural legacy is more subtle.

Guy de la Bédoyère explores how Roman Britannia shaped the psyche of modern Britain



n the face of it, it ought to be straightforward to identify the Roman legacy in Britain. We're all familiar with the "What have the Romans

ever done for us?" sketch from Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, an exposition of the Romans' contribution to seemingly every conceivable aspect of civilisation, from law and order to fresh water. It's become a cliché.

But when you look more closely, it's harder to see precisely what the Romans left in Britain. After all, not a single functioning Roman construction survives – not even aqueducts or sewers. London, for example, didn't get a post-Roman supply of fresh drinking water until the New River system was constructed in 1613.

Yes, the Romans established a street grid (two, in fact) in the town of Silchester – but an earlier street grid had already been installed by the Atrebates tribe in the century before the Roman occupation. In any case, the town was abandoned after the Roman period, and the site remains open fields to this day. Scarcely a single road in the City of London corresponds with the Roman street grid beneath the modern streets. Nor is there any institutional legacy. English law, for example, isn't based on Roman law.

The truth about the Roman legacy in Britain is a great deal more subtle than at first appears. The most potent aspect is the idea of Britannia as the embodiment of the island. To the Romans, this wasn't anything special: by habit they 'personified' places and concepts, usually in female form – Roma herself, for example, or Hispania (Spain) and Hilaritas (Joy) – and depicted these figures on coins or as statues.

The Romans created dozens of these personifications, but for the most part they've disappeared from everyday life. Not Britannia, though. Britannia represented the notion of this island as a single entity, and in the Roman mindset as a remote militarised province. She first appeared, as a defeated woman being attacked by the emperor Claudius, in a sculpture at Aphrodisias in Turkey. But Britannia found her true form in coins issued first by Hadrian in 119, then by Antoninus Pius in 143 and 154. She is presented as a female warrior seated on rocks, armed and with a shield. This isn't a defeated indigenous Britannia, but a representation of a Roman province with a huge garrison and a warlike nature.

The significance of Britannia as a concept shouldn't be underestimated. The idea was revived under Charles II with pattern farthings dated 1665 and copied from the Hadrian coins.



A Roman coin of Antoninus Pius, struck in AD 143, portraying Britannia

From the 1670s onwards these coins went into full production, and from then until changes to the design of the 50p coin in 2008, a more or less continuous sequence of issues carried the image of Britannia; she still appears on the Royal Mint's Britannia series of bullion coins. Her attributes have changed – the spear has been replaced by a trident, for example, and her shield bears a Union Flag – but there's no doubt about who she is.

London also symbolises this sense of Britain as one unified place. Until the Roman invasion of AD 43, Britain's population was a mass of warring tribes. Their fortunes rose and fell depending on the prestige of their ruler at any one time, their borders fluctuated with the wind, and what little we know of their history comes only from Roman commentators. The Thames, however, seems to have served as a boundary line that didn't change in that context. It was a dividing line.

Under the Romans, the Thames was transformed into a superhighway right into the heart of the island. Effortlessly, instinctively and swiftly, the lowest crossing point became the nexus of the new system of roads. Within a short period a settlement grew around that crossing point where nothing like it had ever existed before. London was born and, for good or ill, has defined the nature of Britannia ever since. Even today it is often easier to travel from

one provincial town to another via London than by any other route, because that's how the Roman road system developed.

Even though those roads were left to decay after the island ceased to be a Roman province in the fifth century, they still survived in many instances to define the infrastructure of England, especially in the Middle Ages. Many pilgrims who trod their way to Becket's shrine at Canterbury followed Watling Street, a road laid by the invading Roman army over a millennium earlier. And the A1 today follows on and off the path set out by the Ninth legion in the mid-first century.

The towns linked by this system formed the basis of some of today's greatest county towns and cathedral cities such as Exeter, Gloucester and York. Of course, it's important to appreciate that many major cities and towns do not have Roman origins – Norwich, for example – but that doesn't alter the essential point.

Anyone travelling through Roman Britain and heading north would, by the early second century, have found him- or herself approaching the vast controlled frontier we know as Hadrian's Wall. It does not correspond with the modern border between England and Scotland, but it played a huge role in establishing a consciousness that the far north, which the Romans called Caledonia, was a separate place. The hostility between the nations in the medieval period, English suspicion about accepting a Scottish king in 1603, and even the very different attitudes to Brexit adopted by Scotland and England – all show how different those separate identities are. Even in its ruinous and obsolete state, the wall still seems to symbolise that sense of difference.

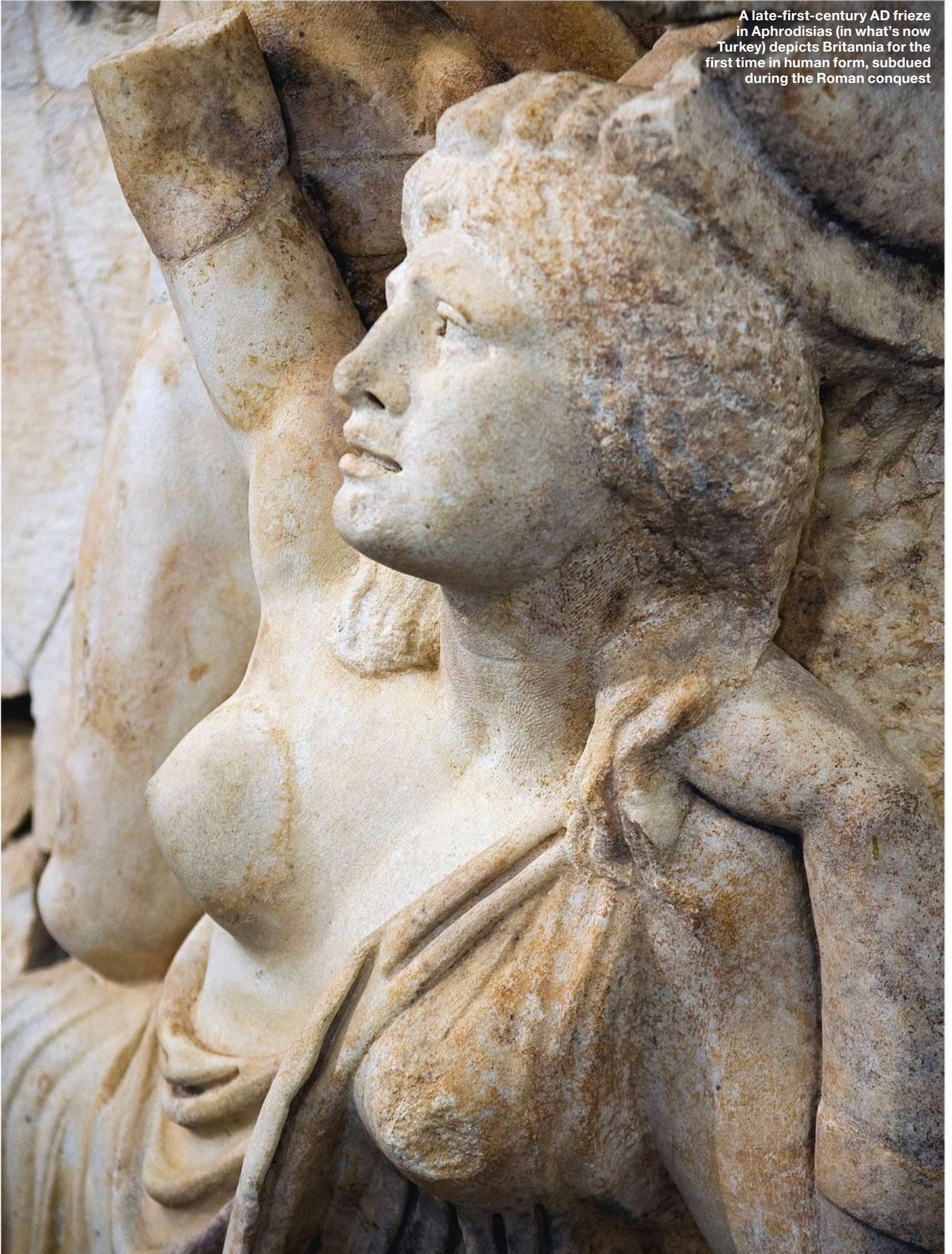
Roman realism

The notion and depiction of Britannia also introduced a completely novel concept of representation. The very idea of portraying humans and other living beings in what we would call a 'realistic' form was revolutionary in Britain in the first century AD. This much is quite apparent from native coinage, which carried schematic and abstract images of horses. Created from swirls, lozenges and pellets, these are often brilliantly realised works of art, but realistic they are not. They belong to a totally separate tradition.

Before AD 43 some tribes, recognising that the Romans had created a new template of power, had started to use figures and motifs, as well as lettering, borrowed from Roman coins. Accordingly, these are more instantly recognisable to us as 'realistic'. However, these coins were limited in distribution, both geographically and within tribes, and it was not until after the invasion that the idea of depicting humans with lifelike proportions became widespread. Within a few years of the invasion,

THE VERY IDEA OF PORTRAYING HUMANS IN A REALISTIC FORM WAS REVOLUTIONARY IN BRITAIN IN THE FIRST CENTURY AD


A late-first-century AD frieze in Aphrodisias (in what's now Turkey) depicts Britannia for the first time in human form, subdued during the Roman conquest



Legacy / What they did for us

The impressive hypocaust – underfloor heating system – at Bignor Roman Villa. The villa's impressive mosaics and facilities inspired a number of scholars





FROM THE ARRIVAL OF THE ROMANS, PEOPLE HAD BOTH THE WILL AND THE ABILITY TO MEMORIALISE THEIR OWN EXISTENCES

all circulating coinage in Britain featured a portrait of the emperor and on the reverse usually a classical deity or personification.

When in early modern times Europeans encountered peoples – such as indigenous Australians – with no such tradition and with quite divergent mindsets, confusion and misunderstandings resulted. Born into a world of photography, film and classicised sculpture, from our very early years we are familiar with the idea that a photograph is a recognisable representation of a specific human being. Similarly, the Romans recognised the realism of depictions of emperors on coins or sculptures, or of ordinary people on tombstones. Indeed, it is impossible for us to ‘un-imagine’ that. Anthropological studies of other cultures have revealed instances of adults who grew up with no such tradition being completely bewildered by a two-dimensional image of a living being, or who find photographs of different individuals quite indistinguishable.

Once this idea had arrived in Britain, though, it initiated a slow process of permanent change. After the Roman departure, some early Anglo-Saxon coins emulated the Roman coin portraits, albeit in a very schematic way. The habit stuck right the way through into the Middle Ages though it was not until the beginning of the 16th century that Henry VII first issued coins with truly realistic profile portraits once more.

Henry VII's coins, however, also took inspiration from the art of 15th-century Italy and the Renaissance – a reminder that legacy is more complex than a simple linear process, and is sometimes more indirect. Much of the ‘Roman’ legacy in Britain today found its way here in later centuries, through various routes.

That is undoubtedly the case with at least some of the English language. A huge proportion of English today comprises words with origins in Latin or Greek, but which can often be traced back to terms created more recently. ‘Suffragette’, for example, has its roots in the Latin *suffragium* (vote) – but it is hardly a word carried down from the period when Britain was a Roman province.

Latin and literacy did survive the end of the Roman period in Britain, but only just. The Roman language and writing scraped an existence in the west among isolated communities that sustained some semblance of classicised existence. The early church, monasticism and tenuous contacts with the Eastern Roman empire helped. Latin words survived in Welsh, used for things of which the indigenous communities had no knowledge before the Roman invasion – for example, *ffenestr* (window) from *fenestra*. These were the legacy of almost four centuries when Latin was the official language of Britain.

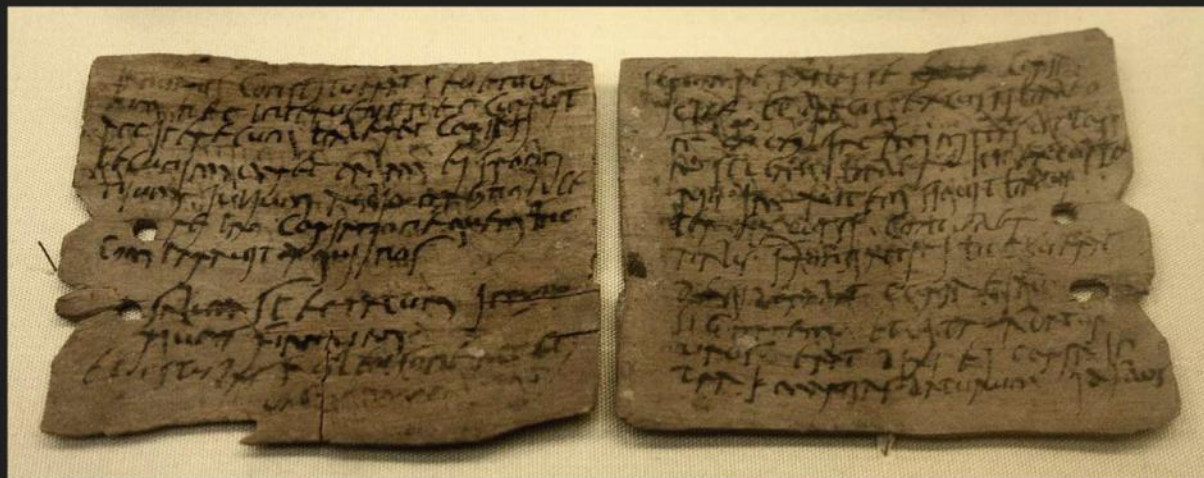
Other classical words found their way back to Britain later in Norman French, or via the scientific revolution of the 17th and 18th centuries. Those scientists created new words using classical components, confident that their classically educated peers across Europe would also understand them.

Far more important was how literacy made it possible for a sense of self to be recorded in transmissible form. Our knowledge of ordinary individuals from history begins only with the Roman occupation, made possible through tombstones, religious dedications, graffiti and so on. Yes, that record is exceedingly biased towards the Roman army and immigrants, but it represents a truly dramatic change in perception: from the arrival of the Romans, people had both the will and the ability to memorialise their own existences. Though commonplace in the rest of the classical world, this was new for Britain. It barely survived the Roman period – but survive it did, and its legacy in our culture is one of the clearest bequests of the Roman era.

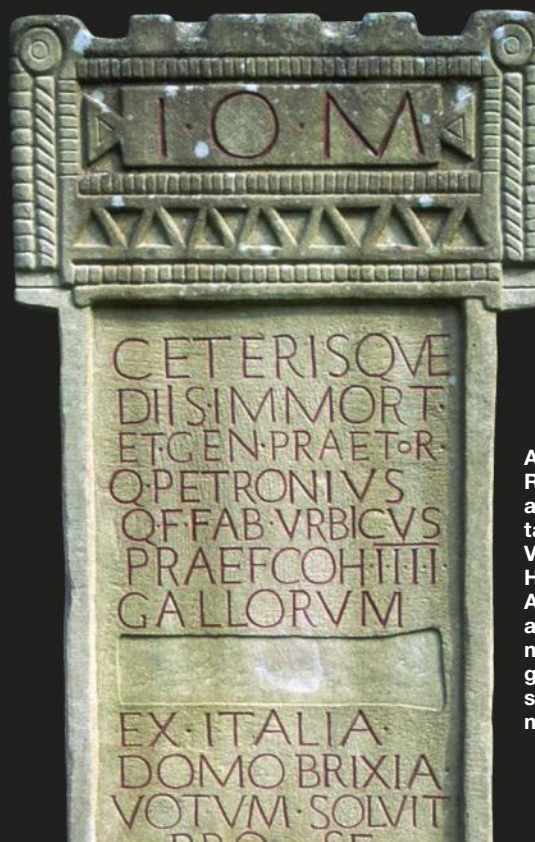
Laying classical foundations

Though the process of establishing its legacy was fragmented, in no way does that undermine the importance of the influence of the Roman era. The sheer quantity and visibility of Roman remains and artefacts provoked serious interest from the 16th century, when William Camden (1551–1623), one of the leading authorities of the day, produced arguably the first serious study of Roman Britain. From 1660, shortly after the Restoration, the Royal Society encouraged the exploration and understanding of everything and anything of note. Finds of Roman antiquities such as coin hoards were reported and discussed. On 7 February 1683, for example, the discovery of a Roman altar in the Tyne at Newcastle was announced to the members.

Though little understood at that time, these discoveries and explorations were laying the foundations of modern classifications and academic rigour. The Roman villa at Bignor fell into ruin in the fifth century and, apart from serving as a handy source of stone, was



An inscribed statue base from the Roman town at Caerwent. Latin left its legacy in the Welsh language



A second-century Roman altar (left) and (top) writing tablets from Vindolanda near Hadrian's Wall. Artefacts such as this provided material for generations of scholars across many disciplines

forgotten about. But when it was rediscovered in the early 19th century, the world was a different place. Britain was home to the dynamic industrial revolution that had brought the nation enormous wealth, helping to fund the rich and curious on their tours to explore continental Europe.

Transfixed by the discoveries at Pompeii, among other places, these men and women were anxious to bring back the classical world to Britain. Bignor's superb mosaics caused a sensation: they demonstrated that classical art had existed in Britain. The antiquarian scholar Samuel Lysons (1763–1819), who publicised the discoveries both at Bignor and at other sites in a series of brilliant publications, played an important role in a much larger process of the integration of classical

imagery and ideas in Britain, helping to characterise the art, architecture, and consciousness of the era.

Lysons was among a number of inspired scholars who established an academic tradition in history and archaeology that, over the past 200 years, has become the envy of the

THE ROMAN ERA HAS INSPIRED THE STUDY OF LATIN, GEOPHYSICS, CONSERVATION AND REASONING

world. The colossal quantity of Roman material in Britain – from the ruins of Hadrian's Wall to the magnificent Orpheus mosaic at Woodchester, and from the study of Roman rural settlement to the writing tablets found at Vindolanda and London – have all provided generations of scholars, specialists and students with the evidence that underlies their disciplines. The Roman era has provided inspiration and stimulus for the study of vernacular Latin, the science of geophysics, conservation, dating techniques and reasoning through analysis, adding to evidence from prehistoric and post-Roman Britain.

That work led in turn to the establishment of an itinerary in the modern sense: a collection of sites with links to the Roman era that can be visited by the public. This affects our whole



A fourth-century mosaic at Lullingstone Villa in Kent portrays the abduction of Europa by the god Jupiter, disguised as a bull

sense of Britain as a place with a fascinating past, bolstered by the many related books and magazines. It is crucial to our identity as a nation, manifest in the notion of Britannia.

Adventures in Roman Britain

Though the majority of excavated Roman sites have been reburied, Britain is dotted with remarkable places that are still open to visitors, and which have helped define our sense of this island and its place in a broader historical context. Modern experiences in Roman Britain can range from reading Rosemary Sutcliff's *Eagle of the Ninth* to visits to a fort on Hadrian's Wall, the Corinium Museum in Cirencester or the baths and temple precinct of Sulis Minerva at Bath.

The Roman past is built into and around

our present world, even if sometimes that doesn't seem very obvious. Walk the walls at Chester and York and you'll follow structures built by the Romans and adapted in the Middle Ages. The Norman castle at Pevensey is built into a late Roman 'Saxon Shore' fort. The Guildhall yard in London corresponds to the arena of London's Roman amphitheatre, and has remained an open space ever since it was laid out in the late first century.

A short detour from the M25 is Lullingstone Roman Villa in Kent. Its centrepiece is a mosaic depicting Europa being abducted by Jupiter in the guise of a bull, with a witty allusion to Virgil's *Aeneid* – classical literature inscribed on a floor that was once part of a house lived in by an educated Roman family! Even more astonishing is the fact that

the remains of a Saxon church stood nearby until the 18th century – surely an echo of a memory that this villa had once been a Christian Roman house church, frescoes from which are now in the British Museum.

In short, the legacy of Rome in Britain is absolutely integral to our sense of self and the place in which we live – even if sometimes you have to look quite hard for it. **B**

Guy de la Bédoyère is a historian and writer, author of *Roman Britain: A New History* (Thames and Hudson, 2013)

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Charlotte Higgins on... **how we interpret history**

“The librarian had made a fatal error in translating the tablet: he had read the text upside down. It was, in fact, a curse”

History is not about charting fixed points in the past, like an astronomer training a telescope on the heavenly bodies. History is much more like watching a play. The lines may stay more or less the same but the audience, and its relationship with the drama, changes. The way cinemagoers watched Laurence Olivier’s *Henry V* in 1944, in the thick of the Second World War, was completely different from how audiences watched Nicholas Hytner’s production at the National Theatre in 2003, as the invasion of Iraq began.

Even if (a big if) we broadly agree on the facts of what happened when, each generation, each person, interprets history in a different way. To use another analogy, history is an unstable chemical reaction between the events of the past and the events of the present.

This unstable chemical effect is, to me, particularly pronounced in the study of Roman Britain. Why? It’s partly because the period is so politically loaded in itself – it represents 400 years when Britain was a part of an empire. For those who were thinking and writing at a time when Britain had its own empire, and for those thinking now, as the nation continues to wrestle with a post-imperial past, that uncomfortable fact looms large. When we read about Roman Britain, we are constantly being asked: whose side are you on?

Most of the 18th-century antiquaries I studied while researching my book *Under Another Sky* had a habit of aligning themselves with ‘civilised’ Romans: Sir John Clerk of Penicuik, for example, a landlord of estates south of Edinburgh, regarded the Romans as the vanguard of the Scottish Enlightenment, bringing ‘civility’ to the lowlands (a quality that the Highlands lacked – or so he felt). It will perhaps come as no surprise that he was both a commissioner for the Act of Union and on the Hanoverian side during the 1745 Stuart uprising. As a member of a subgroup of the Society of Antiquaries called the Equites Romani (‘the Roman Knights’), he gave himself the nickname *Agricola*, after the first-century Roman governor of Britain who won a short-lived but dramatic victory over the Caledonians at Mons Graupius.

His fellow *eques* (and passionately patriotic Scot) Alexander Gordon, though, adopted the name of the Caledonians’ heroic-but-doomed leader, Calgacus, and praised the mountains of the Highlands that had acted as “Bulwarks, for the better defending their

Independancy and Freedom” and had preserved them “from the gripping Tallons of the grand Plunderers of the World”. He was, in fact, paraphrasing a speech that the historian Tacitus put into the mouth of Calgacus himself at the battle at Mons Graupius. Roman historians, especially Tacitus, had a habit of according the enemy a certain humanity; in inventing for them fine Roman rhetoric, they also allowed ‘barbarians’ to act as vehicles for critiques of the imperial project. (Calgacus may or may not have made a speech to his troops, but clearly no one was there from the Roman side to record it.) Calgacus’s speech in Tacitus’s *Agricola* contains that unforgettable condemnation of the Roman military, recycled to describe any number of grim conflict situations since: “They make a desert and call it peace.”

Sometimes the chemical reaction of history can go spectacularly – and revealingly – wrong. In 1904 the librarian of the Bodleian in Oxford, Edward Nicholson, decided to decipher some fragmentary Latin text scratched on a lead tablet found in Bath. He published his translation: it was a letter between early Christians, one warning the other against the influence of the Arian heresy (a dispute about the nature of the Trinity, debated at the council of Nicaea in AD 325). It was a sensational discovery, covered in all the newspapers of the time: this was unparalleled evidence of a literate, active community of Romano-British Christians.

Ninety years later, though, the papyrologist Dr Roger Tomlin took another look. He discovered that Nicholson had made a fatal error: he had read the text upside down. The writing was, in fact, a curse.

Hundreds of similar curse tablets have been found, excavated in the sacred spring at Bath. The writer of Nicholson’s tablet was asking the goddess Sulis Minerva to deprive a thief of sleep until he or she gave up their ill-gotten loot. Tomlin, one of the country’s foremost interpreters of Romano-British cursive, is convinced that Nicholson did not intend to deceive – he simply saw what he wanted to see.

This is the story, on the one hand, of an interpretative disaster. But to me it is also part of what makes thinking about Roman Britain so exciting. Britain’s Roman past is intriguingly mercurial, slippery and hard to grasp. It is the opposite of dusty, dry and dull. It is fascinatingly alive – and, unless we are very careful, shows us only what we want to see.

It should be noted, however, that even now Tomlin always turns over the faint, fragmentary texts he is deciphering. Just in case. **H**

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Charlotte Higgins is chief culture writer of *The Guardian* and author of *Under Another Sky: Journeys in Roman Britain* (Jonathan Cape, 2013)



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Historian Miles Russell on the challenges facing Roman troops as they attempted to consolidate and expand the province they'd established in AD 43

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